

# SUFISM'S ROLE IN AL-GHAZĀLĪ'S FIRST CRISIS OF KNOWLEDGE

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## ABSTRACT

This paper reconstructs the chronology, content, and consequences of al-Ghazālī's first crisis of knowledge for his epistemological doctrine. In so doing, we explore his teaching on: 1) sense perceptions, 2) axiomatic cognitions, and 3) the knowledge-claims which are made on the basis of each source. We also explain why his skepticism emerged, what its exact dimensions were, how his skeptical interlude ended, and what the restoration of certitude about rational knowledge entailed for him in the approximate period between 461/1068-1069 and 488/1094-1095. In answering these questions, we emphasize and clarify the role that popular Sufism, especially in terms of its doctrine of esoteric knowledge or *mā'rifa*, played in the formation of al-Ghazālī's essential perspective on rational knowledge.

### I. *The Problem: A Sufism-precipitated "First" Crisis?*

Discussions of abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad al-Ghazālī's life (450/1058-505/1111) have tended to emphasize what are undeniably its more dramatic episodes. In part, this has resulted from the quality of the orchestration of the data of that life in his autobiographical memoir, *al-Munqidh min al-dalāl* [The deliverer from error]. Largely as a result of its author's explicit aim of communicating his personal quest for sure and certain knowledge to his co-religionists, al-Ghazālī's famed encounter with doubt is seen typically as monolithic in nature and uniform in causal motivation.<sup>1</sup> Vivid description, dramatically foreshortened por-

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<sup>1</sup> Much has been made of the facts that the *Munqidh* plainly is not a straightforward biographical narrative and that his *selbstbiographie* presents a highly schematized and telescoped account of al-Ghazālī's intellectual development. There is no need here to enter

trayal of events, and emotionally charged depiction of doubt with its seductive *wasāwis* ("whisperings") all combine to veil the course of the historical occurrences of al-Ghazālī's life in such a way that it is quite difficult to discern first, that two crises of knowledge actually took place and second, that each period of epistemological uncertainty possessed its own motivations and incitations, thereby focusing upon wholly differing kinds of knowledge with appropriately divergent aims as well as objects.

If we are to define accurately al-Ghazālī's thought on reason and rational evidence in the period before he renounced his professorial post in Baghdad at the end of 488 A.H./1095 A.D., then we need to understand exactly what happened during the course of his crisis of knowledge, what factors occasioned that skeptical interlude, how these elements shaped his inquiry into certain knowledge (*al-'ilm al-yaqīnī*), as well as how they contoured the resolution of his skeptical crisis. The present study will examine al-Ghazālī's encounter with doubt in order to show first, that this skeptical interlude came early in his life, second, that it concerned rational knowledge and reason alone, and third, that the crisis developed because popular mysticism's paradigm of knowledge which, in bits and pieces, al-Ghazālī imbibed from his earliest childhood, made divine knowledge (*ma'rifa*; *kashf*) so cataleptic and clear that, by comparison, rational human knowledge seemed tenebrous, uncertain, and without value. I also intend to prove that the mechanics of this initial crisis and its resolution

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this debate, for the *Munqidh* undeniably memorializes his soul's maturation. Dates are given with the *hijrī* year first followed by the Christian year. I have used Jabre's edition of the Arabic text: abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad al-Ghazālī, *al-Munqidh min adḍalāl*, ed. F. Jabre (Beirut, 1959) [hereafter *Munqidh*]. English translations of the *Munqidh* are provided in W. M. Watt, *The Faith and Practice of al-Ghazālī* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1953) [hereafter *Faith*] as well as in R. J. McCarthy, *Freedom and Fulfillment* (Boston: Twayne, 1980) [hereafter *Freedom*]. V. Poggi is the author of an excellent Italian translation and study of the *Munqidh* entitled *Un classico della spiritualità musulmana* (Rome: Libreria dell'università gregoriana, 1967). Scholars generally agree that the *Munqidh* was written late in al-Ghazālī's second period of public teaching which spanned the years 499-503/1106-1109. D. B. Macdonald in "Life of al-Ghazālī, with especial reference to his religious experiences and opinions," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 20 (1899), 71-132 [hereafter "Life"] maintains that (87 n. 1) this work was composed after 500 A.H., while M. Bouyges in *Essai de chronologie des œuvres d'al-Ghazālī* (Beirut: Imprimerie catholique, 1959) [hereafter *Essai de chronologie*] pinpoints (70-71) the years 501-502/1107-1109. McCarthy in *Freedom*, xxv dates the *Munqidh* on the basis of a manuscript copy (MS 1712) held in the collection of the Shehid 'Alī Pasha Library in Istanbul. The colophon bears the date 509/1115-1116, "i.e., five years after Ghazālī's death and so about ten years after the composition of the *Munqidh*." Since al-Ghazālī remarked that he had been devoted to the search for truth throughout his life "until now when I am over fifty" [after 500 A.H.] (*Munqidh*, 10, lines 10-11), it seems safe to conclude that he did compose this work in 502/1108 or in 503 which began on 31 July 1109.

established al-Ghazālī not as “a thorough-going skeptic,” but rather as a thoroughly rational critic; a critic first, of efforts to laud reason and the senses beyond their evidentiary limits and second, of efforts to praise ecstatic perception beyond its capacities for proof. In line with this last goal, we must examine and critique, as far as it is possible, the philosophical assertions, questions, and implications of al-Ghazālī’s arguments as these are brought forth in his autobiographical memoir.

Three issues must be addressed at the outset of this study. First, what evidence exists to substantiate our claim that al-Ghazālī’s crisis of knowledge occurred in two different and widely separated periods in his life? Second, what proof supports our claim that his crisis period must be distinguished as two separate episodes not merely temporally, but more significantly with regard to causation and content. Third, what evidentiary questions arise when using a unique source that was not written contemporaneously with the life-events and life-circumstances that it describes? In the *Munqidh*, he recounted that “from my early youth, since I attained the age of puberty before I was twenty, until the present time when I am over fifty, [namely, after 500 A.H. which began on 2 September 1106] I have scrutinized the creed of every sect, [and] I have tried to lay bare the inmost doctrines of every community. All this I have done that I might distinguish the true from the false. . . .” Moreover in the same volume, al-Ghazālī says that “from a very early age” he had accustomed himself to nurture his innate, instinctive, and God-given (*gharīẓatan wa fitratan min Allāh*) thirst for an understanding of “things as they really are” (*ḥaqā’iq al-umūr*). Al-Ghazālī’s impulse to question received beliefs and the sources from which they came thus took shape early. He admits plainly that as he “drew near the age of adolescence the yoke of slavish imitation of received beliefs (*rābiṭa ’l-taqlīd*) ceased to hold me and inherited beliefs lost their grip upon me. . . .” We justly can infer from the above passages, then, that al-Ghazālī had sought to ask questions of those in authority when he was still very young.

In his first-person account of his intellectual and spiritual journey, al-Ghazālī further explains that prior to puberty, the onset of which occurred sometime between his mid-to-late teenaged years, he desired to discover the exact dimensions and scope of his divinely implanted nature (*fiṭra*) as well as the precise contents of the legacy of beliefs he had inherited from parents and teachers. In the same passage, he also identifies this effort of discovery as one of rational, intellectual investigation. He wrote: “I heard, too, the *ḥadīth* related of the Prophet of God according to which he said: ‘Everyone is born with a *fiṭra*; it is his

parents who make him a Jew or a Christian or a Magian'. My innermost being was keenly moved to discover what the reality (*ḥaqīqa*) of this original nature (*al-ḥiṭra al-aṣliya*) was and what the true meaning of the accidental beliefs derived from the authority (*ḥaqīqat al-'aḳā'id al-'arīda bi-taqlīd*) of parents and teachers was." He further explained: "[And thus I wanted] to distinguish these authority-based beliefs (*hādhihi taqlīdāt*), whose beginnings are suggestions dictated from without, since in the process of discerning those that are true from those that are false, differences [of opinion] appeared."<sup>2</sup>

These passages taken together all plainly confirm that as a youth al-Ghazālī set his foot upon a path that would lead him ultimately to question what he knew in a systematic procedure for the purpose of verifying his beliefs as actual knowledge. In his attempt to discover what authentic knowledge derived from the authority of parents and teachers, al-Ghazālī began his process of questioning received beliefs in order to "distinguish the true in them from the false." He understood that this endeavor stimulated the mind, since "he who does not doubt, does not investigate, and he who does not investigate does not perceive, and he who does not perceive remains in blindness and in error." Apart from the typical adolescent's effort at "breaking away," another factor may be seen at work. Al-Ghazālī revolted against relying on *taqlīd* purposely "to free his mind from that burdensome captivity, in order to search for that which of itself aroused the attention of the rational soul, and by so doing, to make it easier for the soul to attain its happiness and joy."<sup>3</sup>

We should assume far too much if we were to argue that al-Ghazālī entertained sophisticated epistemological questions as a child in the beginning levels of *kuttāb*-school education. It seems reasonable to assert, however, that he had begun to speculate about these matters by the time he had reached his eleventh birthday, in 461/1068-1069, and had embarked upon his further education in Tus. He continued his formal schooling in his hometown for ten years, until 471/1078-1079, with the exception of a visit he made to Jurjan, which lay at the southeastern

<sup>2</sup> *Munqidh*, 10, lines 10-11, 13-15, *Faith*, 20; *Munqidh*, 10, lines 21-23, 11, line 1, *Faith*, 21; *Munqidh*, 11, lines 3-7, *Faith*, 21. Cf. abū Ḥamid Muḥammad al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā' 'ulūm al-dīn*, ed. M. Halabi (Cairo: al-Maṭba'at al-'uthmāniyat al-miṣriya, 1346/1927 [vol. 1], 1352/1933 [vols. 2-4]) [hereafter *Iḥyā'*], 1:1, 75.

<sup>3</sup> abū Ḥamid Muḥammad al-Ghazālī, *Mi'yār al-'ilm fī fann al-manṭiq* (Beirut: Dār al-Andalus, 1964) [hereafter *Mi'yār*], 26, lines 1-4. Cf. abū Ḥamid Muḥammad al-Ghazālī, *Miẓān al-'amal* (Cairo: Maṭba'at kurdistān al-'ilmīya, 1328/1910) [hereafter *Miẓān*], 154. *Mi'yār*, 8, lines 18-21 (editor's preface), also quoted in M. Smith, *al-Ghazālī the Mystic* (London: Luzac and Co., 1944) [hereafter *al-Ghazālī*], 16.

corner of the Caspian Sea, sometime during the year 467/27 August 1074 to 15 August 1075. He spent no more than one year at Jurjan, studying at an intermediate level the Shāfiʿite system of *fiqh* under the direction of abū Naṣr al-Ismāʿīlī (d. 477/1084-1085). This is the same period that saw him begin coursework in the doctrinal differences that separated the four major “schools” (*madhāhib*) of Sunni Muslim jurisprudence. When he returned to his natal city no later than the last day of 467 (15 August 1075), al-Ghazālī commenced the work of “polishing” his character under the guidance of the Sufi shaykh Yūsuf al-Nassāj, to whom he confided his dreams. These initial lessons in spirituality, which extended over a period of approximately three years, appear to have stimulated al-Ghazālī’s interest in Sufism.

Al-Ghazālī began advanced legal studies in 471/1078-1079 when he enrolled at the academically rigorous Nizāmīya *madrassa* at Nisabur, and he remained there for approximately seven years through Rabīʿ al-thānī 478/August 1085. The Imam al-Ḥaramayn, abūʾl Maʿālī ʿAbdallah al-Juwaynī (d. 478/1085-1086) was his professor both of Shāfiʿite jurisprudence and of *ʿilm al-kalām*, or systematic theology. Among al-Juwaynī’s most brilliant law students, al-Ghazālī rose rapidly and eventually served as his master’s teaching assistant. On his own, he gave lectures to his fellow students and he began to write. He was a student of impressive ability whose keen rational thinking skills distinguished him in al-Juwaynī’s eyes who, when evaluating his students, remarked that “al-Ghazālī’s [strong point] is speculation.”

The chronology of al-Ghazālī’s formal education is important because his initial crisis of knowledge probably occurred at some point within this time period. As he recounted just a few years before his death, for nearly two months he “was a skeptic in fact, but neither in theory nor in outward expression” (*anā fihimā ʿalā madhhab al-safsāṭa bi-ḥukm al-ḥāl, lā bi-ḥukm al-nuṭq waʾl-maqal*).<sup>4</sup> This crisis of skepticism destroyed his previously confident reliance on the ability of sensory perception and reason to offer true and certain knowledge. His protracted experience of doubt was self-induced as part of a deliberate methodological inquiry into knowledge by an apparently insightful and studious boy who likely was not more than twenty years of age. Al-Ghazālī explains clearly the

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<sup>4</sup> W. M. Watt, *Muslim Intellectual* (Edinburgh: the University Press, 1963) [hereafter *Intellectual*], 133-134; *Essai de chronologie*, 7; Muḥammad Murtaḍā al-Zabīdī, *Ithāf al-sādāt al-muttaqīn bi-sharḥ asrār Iḥyāʾ ʿulūm al-dīn*, 10 vols. (Cairo: 1311/1893-1894) [hereafter *Ithāf*], 1:9, “Life,” 76, 90; *Ṭabaqāt*, 4:106; also quoted in *al-Ghazālī*, 16; *Munqidh*, 13, lines 20-21.

origin, dimension as well as scope, and result of his first crisis of skepticism in the *Munqidh min al-ḍalāl*:

I. I began by saying to myself: 'what I seek is knowledge of the true natures of things [*fī 'ilm bi-ḥaqā'iq al-umūr*]. Of necessity, then, I must inquire into what the true meaning of knowledge is' [*ḥaqīqat al-'ilm*]. Then it became clear to me that sure and certain knowledge is that in which the thing known [*al-ma'lūm*] is disclosed in such a fashion that no doubt [*lā shakk*] remains along with it, that no possibility of error or illusion accompanies it, the heart not even being able to suppose it. Certain knowledge also must be infallible . . . since every [item of] knowledge unaccompanied by safety from error is not sure and certain knowledge. . . .

II. Thereupon I investigated the various kinds of knowledge I had, and found myself destitute of all knowledge with this characteristic of infallibility except in the case of sense-data [*al-ḥissiyāt*] and the [self-evident] necessary truths [*al-ḍarūrīyāt*]. . . . With great earnestness, I began to reflect on sense-data and on necessary truths to see whether I could make myself doubt them. The outcome of this protracted effort to induce doubt was that I no longer could trust sense-data either. Then I said: 'My reliance on sense-data also has been destroyed. Perhaps I can rely only upon those truths of the intellect that are first principles [*al-awwalīyāt*], . . .' Sense-data replied: 'Do you not expect that your reliance on intellectual truths will fare just like your reliance on sense-data? . . . Perhaps beyond the perception of reason [*idrāk al-'aql*], there may be another judge [who], if he revealed himself, would give the lie to the judgements of reason, . . .'

III. When these thoughts had penetrated my being, I tried to find some way of treating my unhealthy condition; but it was not easy. The disease was baffling, and [it] lasted about two months, during which I was a skeptic in fact, but neither in theory nor in outward expression.<sup>5</sup>

We already know that al-Ghazālī's internal momentum toward questioning what he knew had developed early. Section II of the passage cited states unambiguously that al-Ghazālī's initial crisis of knowledge involved first, factual, and then second, formal, knowledge. Now, factual data describe the contents of the natural universe and their modes of operation. Cognitions of this type also provide information about human beings and their works. By contrast, formal cognitions are those that refer to mental abstractions or concepts and their relational structures. In addition,

<sup>5</sup> *Munqidh*, 11, lines 7-11, 12, lines 1-3, 6-9; 16-19, 13, lines 1-4; 17-22; 13, lines 23-24, 14, lines 1-2. In *Freedom*, 121 n. 43, McCarthy suggests an early occurrence of this period of skepticism, but does not adduce the admittedly sparse evidence to support what is, I think, a correct hypothesis about the timing of al-Ghazālī's initial epistemological crisis. Passage referenced is *Munqidh*, 13, lines 17-24, 14, lines 1-2.

they give information about the construction and operation of symbolic systems, such as those of pure mathematics and formal logic. Anxieties about rational knowledge predominated in al-Ghazālī's first crisis; nevertheless, they did so against the screen of theological knowledge. Cognitions in this arena concerned the existence and nature of the deity, His relations to the world and to man, cosmic creation, teleology in nature, prophets, angelic and demonic spirits, and so forth.

We know as well that he began his advanced professional legal education at the Nisabur Nizāmiya *madrasa*, when he was twenty one years of age in 471/1078-1079. Now, it is difficult to suppose that al-Ghazālī experienced severe and corrosive skepticism about the truth and certainty of sense- and reason-based knowledge-claims at the same time as he was very effectively demonstrating his reasoning abilities by lecturing and writing in the rationally constructed discipline of the law. It is likewise difficult to maintain that somehow he hid such deep-seated doubts, while he successfully pursued the rigorous legal curriculum with a widely celebrated professor of law at an academically distinguished institution of higher learning. It is more likely to suppose that al-Ghazālī passed through his crisis of skepticism before embarking upon his studies at Nisabur. This assumption is borne out not only by his academic career at Nisabur, but also by his emphasis on doubt as a necessary propaedeutic to meaningful speculative inquiry. Al-Ghazālī, we suggest, would retain his critical eye in terms of investigating, thinking, and writing about both rational and mystical knowledge long after he had surmounted his youthful attack of skepticism.

Composed very late in al-Ghazālī's life, the *Munqidh min al-ḍalāl* functions as a remembrance of things past for the purpose of communicating to his audience, the fundamental truth which he had learned—it was consciousness of the possibility of *kashf* that allowed him to employ his reason appropriately. Faith and confidence in God's guidance ultimately were required for al-Ghazālī to trust his reason. By the time al-Ghazālī wrote his autobiographical memoir, he had traversed many intellectual paths and had experienced several false starts on the mystical journey to God. Even though this crisis of skeptical confusion occurred early in his life, al-Ghazālī described it long after the events narrated had taken place, and after he had investigated and fully assimilated diverse fields of reason- as well as revelation-based study. In writing the *Munqidh* just a few short years before his death, al-Ghazālī likely was preoccupied with the primary purpose of conveying in a palpable and accessible way the progress and result of his journey toward fulfillment

in God. As a result, when it came to explaining his crisis of rational knowledge—its genesis and solution—in such a way that the dramatic contrast between *kashf/maʿrifa* and *ʿaql* could be conveyed at the heightened level at which al-Ghazālī undoubtedly experienced it, al-Ghazālī employed the vocabulary of the Islamic philosophers, especially that of Ibn Sīnā, when talking about rational knowledge.

We now have set out the basic evidence for a division of al-Ghazālī's period of skepticism into two distinct events, the first of which occurred relatively early in his life, almost certainly before he was twenty, and perhaps even several years before. Additionally, we now have raised the difficult question of the language used to describe his initial crisis and its resolution. The *Munqidh* also recounts the severe anxieties that al-Ghazālī suffered about what he “knew” during those two discrete time spans in his life, the second of which would occur sixteen to seventeen years later, when he was approximately thirty-seven to thirty-eight years of age in 487-488/1094-1095. This is the “crisis of knowledge” which ultimately spurred his first period of retreat from his professional obligations, and which decidedly emphasized his concern with salvific knowledge. Since this epistemological crisis does not comprise the primary focus of the current study, let us return to his initial crisis of rational knowledge. We know now what in general terms al-Ghazālī came to doubt and more specifically, when he came to doubt it, but why did his skepticism develop?

Al-Ghazālī did not explore questions concerning rational knowledge as strictly philosophical issues because his crisis of rational knowledge (*ʿilm*), as we explain, developed against the background that Islamic mystical or Sufi esoteric knowledge (*maʿrifa*) provided. Al-Ghazālī maintained that all human knowledge was either non-inferential and necessary (*darūrī*) or inferential and acquired (*iktisābī*). Thus, a man may know some item of fact or axiom of reasoning either through a priori intuition, direct apperception, or by means of experience. For al-Ghazālī, accordingly, knowledge-claims drawn from intuition or experience that constitute the human being's ordinary sources of information about the world, on the one hand, have a presumed cognitive status that can be evaluated. On the other hand, epistemic claims derived from immediate direct experience of God in this life on the part of those who are not prophets are neither externally verifiable nor do they possess presumptively a meaningful cognitive status. Thus, they either may or may not convey true knowledge about God and the things of the Divine.

While al-Ghazālī's definition of knowledge is designed to apply to human knowing about the material universe through the usual cognitive



sources, it was formulated against the backdrop of a specific and special type of knowledge and modality of knowing, namely, the clear, immediate apprehension of things Divine that was reserved normally for the favorites of God. This stark contrast between the cognitive sources and processes of mundane knowledge and those of religious enlightenment became problematic for al-Ghazālī because he recognized first that if the receipt of non-rational knowledge is possible, then this knowledge may provide another frame of reference for judging the veracity, certainty, and necessity of rational knowledge. He consequently understood that a further standard possibly may exist for assessing the veracity of what is claimed to be rational knowledge. Second, al-Ghazālī realized that if directness and immediacy of knowing are essential hallmarks of true cognition, then how can human beings know that which is not accessible to cognition except through inference?

This dramatic cleavage between rational knowledge and religious or theological knowledge that was primordially non-rational in character structured his crisis of rational knowledge in two ways: first, by providing the criterion—freedom from error and doubt—for certainty, and second, by defining this standard's content in reference to transcendental, spiritual knowledge, in particular Sufi *maʿrifa*. Nonetheless, al-Ghazālī ultimately did not invalidate human cognition by affirming that rational knowledge amounted to nothing more than simple conjecture about what men assume to be the case, but do not know to be so, either in matters of fact, or with reference to propositions of formal knowledge. What he did instead involves maintaining that the ordinary sources of human cognition about the material universe as they normally function provide valid and reliable real-world certainty. Unlike the certitude of divine revelation, the certainty of rational knowledge was neither absolute nor transcendental, but then it did not need to be, as al-Ghazālī argued.<sup>6</sup>

Why did al-Ghazālī explain the certainty of items of rational knowledge in the same way as he understood the certitude that attached to matters of theological knowledge? A part of the answer lies with the cogency of

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<sup>6</sup> Sectional numeration is mine. *Iḥyāʾ* 1:1, 65, lines 9-12: "Every type of knowledge that is obtained in this manner is called a 'certainty,' whether obtained through speculative reasoning (*naẓar*) or through the mind necessarily [as axiomatic] . . . or through tradition . . . or through experimentation (*bi-tajriba*) or through some proof procedure (*aw bi-dalīl*)"; also cf. *Miʿyār*, 47-49. All that rational knowledge demands in order to be designated as *certain* is freedom from doubt. The sources of knowledge listed are ordinary ones. Negation of doubt is opposed to overwhelming certitude of the type that al-Ghazālī described subsequently in *Iḥyāʾ* 1:1, 65, lines 12-16. *Iḥyāʾ* 3:1, 14, lines 25-26.

the mystics' arguments about the quality and character of their special knowledge. Earlier representatives of the Sufi tradition had maintained that the content of their inner experiential knowledge was not communicable; as a result, *ma'rifa* was excluded from external, objective verification. The paradigmatic knowledge of the Sufis was seen by them as immediate and self-authenticating insight on the one hand while, on the other hand, rational knowledge of all but the fundamental axiomatic truths was considered mediate and discursive and subject to error. This striking contrast between mystical knowledge and rational knowledge unquestionably incited al-Ghazālī's initial encounter with doubt.

Al-Ghazālī explored his first crisis of skepticism in the autobiography that he wrote late in his life preeminently for the purpose of offering to members of the Muslim community his personal experiences on the road to uncovering what "certain knowledge" was, both in the circumstances of this life and with respect to the glimpses of the next life which are sometimes afforded to the Blessed among men. From his early days as a student in his natal city of Tus, in northeastern Iran, until he died at Tus in 505/1111, al-Ghazālī understood the question of certitude (*al-yaqīn*) from a double perspective: the divine and the mundane. Briefly stated, transcendental, absolute certainty was reserved for the religious truths that God has made known to man. These truths are those beliefs that divine revelation itself guaranteed and made secure from error. However, with his lens focused singularly upon the verities of the intellect, al-Ghazālī also saw the primary rational principles as sure and indubitably trustworthy.<sup>7</sup> Al-Ghazālī plainly viewed his early effort to inquire into the truth of "things as they are in reality" as an intellectual exercise, one that was designed to "distinguish between these

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<sup>7</sup> F. Jabre, *La notion de certitude selon Ghazālī* (Paris: Vrin, 1958), underlined the dual perspective from which al-Ghazālī viewed the issue of *al-yaqīn*. Al-Ghazālī's epistemology is difficult to reconstruct chiefly because he did not present his teachings systematically and concisely. They are not all contained in the *Munqidh*; instead, they are scattered in bits and pieces throughout his considerable and diverse body of work. Moreover, his explorations of knowledge varied with the aim and the audience for which his many volumes were composed. Al-Ghazālī devoted either the whole contents or substantial sections of the following volumes to examining rational knowledge. Listed chronologically, they are the *Maqāsid*, *Tahāfut*, *Mi'yār*, *Mihakk*, *Fadā'ih*, *Hujjat al-haqq* [lost], and *Qawāsim al-bāṭiniyya* [no longer extant]. Portions of the *Iqtisād* as well as of the *Miẓān* also discussed logical reasoning methods. The *Qisṭās*, *Munqidh*, *Mishkāṭ*, as well as his magisterial *Ihyā'*, all explain diverse characteristics of rational knowledge. In these works, however, al-Ghazālī investigated rational knowledge from the overarching perspective of the contrast between 'ilm and *ma'rifa*, that is, Sufi esoteric knowledge. The *Ihyā'*, notwithstanding, does contain an extended analysis of rational knowledge and its source, the intellect (*al-'aql*), in the first book of its first quarter, entitled the *Kiṭāb al-'ilm*.

authority-based opinions and their principles.” In this understanding, he was hardly unique because others within the Ash‘arite school tradition of systematic theology viewed doubting as a requisite element in the attestation of true belief. This critical perspective suffused al-Ghazālī’s approach to all kinds of knowledge, rational as well as non-rational, and this viewpoint first blossomed in his intellectual rebellion against accepting inherited beliefs *taqlīdan*. Moreover, it seems likely that pride stimulated his disinclination towards remaining a simple depository of information, and not striving to emerge as a leader of men. He claimed that “for this reason, one usually describes a person who merely retains information in his memory, without ever attempting to familiarize himself with its significance and wisdom, as one of the vessels of information. But he who would remove the veil from his heart and allow it to be flooded with the light of guidance (*bi-nūr al-hidāya*) [and who] would himself become a leader to be emulated, [this person] consequently should not blindly follow the example of others.”<sup>8</sup>

The internal promptings which urged al-Ghazālī first, to investigate received verities and second, to move beyond the interests of the traditionally trained religious scholar of his day began early and perhaps are best exemplified by his ability to value and to use all that he could gain and assimilate from earlier knowledge-traditions. He later expressed this viewpoint by arguing in the following way: “Suppose, however, that the statements are found only in their [the philosophers’] books. If they are reasonable in themselves [*ma‘qūlan fī nafsīhi*] and are supported by proof [*mu‘ayyidan bi’l-burhān*], and if they do not contradict the Book and the Sunnah, then it is not necessary to abstain from using them. If we open this door—if we adopt the view that we must abstain from every truth that the mind of a heretic has apprehended before us—then we should be obliged to refrain from much that is true.”

Al-Ghazālī started his process of methodological inquiry into the domain of truth by asking “what is the true meaning of knowledge” (*ḥaqīqat al-‘ilm mā hiya*)? Defining true knowledge as that which is “certain and infallible, beyond even the heart’s mere supposition of doubt,” al-Ghazālī then investigated sense-perception-derived inferences and the necessary first truths of reason, with the aim of seeing if he could make himself doubt them.<sup>9</sup> His endeavor met with success; in fact, he fell victim to a corrosive epistemic skepticism that he likened to a “disease.”

<sup>8</sup> *Munqidh*, 11, lines 5-7; *Ihyā’* 1:1, 69, lines 28-30.

<sup>9</sup> *Munqidh*, 26, lines 9-13. *Munqidh*, 11, lines 9-10. The noun *al-qalb* (line 10) means *the heart*. Although it is an often-used synonym for *the mind*, the literal translation in this context seems preferable. Also, see *Mi‘yār*, 9, lines 21-23. *Munqidh*, 12, lines 6-8.

I now must explore in specific detail the precise content of his assessment of sense-data-based rational knowledge. What were the key elements of his attack on the senses?

## II. *The Critique of Sense Perception in the Munqidh min al-ḍalāl*

Al-Ghazālī first doubted the usefulness of sense evidence in providing man with true and certain knowledge of the phenomenal world. Al-Ghazālī summed up his inquiry in the case of sense-data by comparing the certitude that a conscious person has of sensible objects to the certainty that a sleeping individual has of those things that appear to him while dreaming. He wrote: “do you not see how, when, you are asleep, you believe things and imagine circumstances, holding them to be stable and enduring, and, so long as you are in that dream-condition, have no doubts about them?”<sup>10</sup> While a person is dreaming, he believes that what appears in his dream really exists. Yet, when the person awakens, he discovers that all of what appeared to him as real was, in actuality, unfounded and did not exist outside his somnolent mind. Concluding this portion of his discussion, al-Ghazālī argued that waking sense presentations, as well as dreams, could be simple mental phantasms.

With sense perceptions, a man relies upon his external physical sense media to provide him with truthful knowledge of those things that are knowable through the senses. Aware of the important role the senses play in the acquisition of data that may or may not be certified as “knowledge,” al-Ghazālī mounted the first step in his assault against sense-data. By using the “most powerful” of all the physical senses, sight, he attempted to prove to himself that sense perception was unreliable. When a man looks at the shadow cast by the pointer of a sundial, he sees the shadow to be still. According to al-Ghazālī, the man then infers on this basis that motion is absent. After experience and a longer period of observation, however, the man comes to know—that is, recognizes intellectually—that the shadow is moving continually, in such a way that it is never at rest. Al-Ghazālī offered another sight-based example of mistaken judgement: a man looks at the sun and from his perspective, he judges it to be quite small, the size of a penny-weight coin (*ḍmār*). But geometrical calculations, as al-Ghazālī maintained, show that the sun is in reality much greater in size than the earth.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> *Munqidh*, 13, lines 5-7. See abū Hāmid Muḥammad al-Ghazālī, *Fayṣal al-tafrīq bayna 'l-islām wa'l-zandāqa*, ed. S. Dunyā (Cairo, 1381/1961) [hereafter *Fayṣal*], 176, lines 8-11.

<sup>11</sup> *Munqidh*, 12, lines 9-14. Al-Ghazālī maintained emphatically that in the case of

It is not very surprising, of course, that al-Ghazālī did not consider unaided sense perception to comprise a sufficient foundation for certain knowledge. His argumentation, however, is not skeptical in its true intent because he did not maintain that the appearances by themselves should constitute an adequate basis for the certainty of the knowledge-claim made as a result. All that his inquiry shows, and all that it was intended to prove, is that sense-derived conclusions about things in the material world are potentially defeasible and dubitable. Al-Ghazālī confirmed that while sense perception did offer man descriptive information about material reality, this information by itself did not constitute “certain knowledge.” This affirmation hardly warrants labeling him a skeptic because, as his illustrations also showed, he maintained that erroneous experiential inferences were corrigible. Sense-data then initially fail al-Ghazālī’s test specification for indubitable knowledge because human statements about material existents, which are based exclusively upon the evidence of the physical senses, are not immune to the discovery of error.

In the text under examination, al-Ghazālī did not distinguish between the appearances themselves and the inferences drawn from them. In the sundial case, for example, there is a mistake about a “common sensible,” that is, motion; by contrast, in the second illustration, the faulty inference drawn stems from a conflict between the evidence of the sense organ and that of the intellect. His analysis of sense as a cognitive source in the *Munqidh* underlines the view that by its nature factual information about the real world must be corrigible. As a result of certain inescapable features of the relationship between a knowing subject and the object known (*al-maʿlūm*),—take, for example, the case of motion and relativity— inferences that are founded upon sense experience can be modified. They can be adjusted either on the basis of additional theoretical knowledge or incremented empirical knowledge or on the foundation provided by a combination of these two. This procedure for gaining knowledge is no different from the modern scientific method. In al-Ghazālī’s first example, then, the correction came about from a more sustained period of observation, while in his second, it resulted from a change in the viewer’s perspective, aided by the viewer’s knowledge of geometry.

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“this and all other similar instances of sense perceptions,” the “sense-judge” (*hākim al-ḥiss*) may be refuted in its conclusions (*aḥkām*, lit. “judgements”) by the “reason-judge” (*hākim al-ʿaql*) which gives the lie to these initial sensory evaluations in a way that cannot be rebutted. See *Mishkāṭ*, 47, lines 3-11 for an analysis of similar illustrations. Also, see W. H. T. Gairdner, tr., *Mishkāṭ al-Anwār* (Lahore: Sh. Muḥammad Ashraf, 1952).

It is important to emphasize that in neither of the two cases that al-Ghazālī described, did sense perception unilaterally arbitrate and resolve the conflict. A type of formal knowledge, in those cases, mathematical logic, corrected the inferences that were drawn from sense-data alone. Al-Ghazālī's examples of faulty sense-based conclusions were sufficient to demonstrate the unreliability of the senses, but insufficient to warrant denying the senses a role in the knowledge-acquisition enterprise.

Al-Ghazālī did not seek to eliminate sense experience as a possible source of knowledge. While his announced primary criterion of true knowledge was the knowledge claim's indubitability and truth, his attack on sense does not constitute general and pervasive skepticism. In the initial section of his critique, al-Ghazālī's argument seems to insist upon the sense-based knowledge-claim's invulnerability to all theoretical possibilities of error; there, he emphasized that the heart [an often used synonym for "mind" or "intellect"] must be able to preclude all prospect of error, even the most conceptually remote possibility.

Where he discussed the application of this criterion, by contrast, his illustrative examples [sundial/shadow and sun/*dīnār*] reveal that he sought to exclude reasonable doubt through the use of appropriate verification procedures, rather than all possible doubt, about some factual matter, first apprehended by or through the physical senses. According to al-Ghazālī's teaching, the preclusion of reasonable doubt about an item of factual information yields certainty about the veridity of the judgement the knower makes concerning it. The certitude gained, however, is not of the transcendental or categorical sort; it is, by comparison, mundane certainty borne out of the real world of common human experience. This mundane certitude nonetheless is "certain," from the point of view that any sensible item of information which is not controverted by the evaluation of the trained intellect provides certain and true knowledge for the human knower. Al-Ghazālī's examples unquestionably show that he maintained that ordinary sense experience-derived judgements are reliable when and if they are not controverted by further accreted sense experience, and supported by reason. The standard of certitude that he advocated here for sense experience-based knowledge-claims is not the criterion of mere "practical certainty," wherein the truth of the claim is sustained only by its workability or utility at a specific moment in time.

What al-Ghazālī did here is important because he established a set of requirements for sense perception-based knowledge that sense data could meet. The claim's truth demanded non-controversion and replication or repeatability, for example, in the case of an experiment. Consistency of

results yielded knowledge of what was claimed to such a high degree of probability that its firmness of truth surpassed the limits of human concern as well as exceeded the boundaries of human need.

Al-Ghazālī's inquiry was designed to encourage doubt but not to defeat knowledge acquisition. As a positive enterprise, doubting aids in the certification of what effectively constitutes knowledge and without first doubting the truth of a knowledge-claim, inquiry into the support system for the claim likely would not begin. Doubt then acts as a catalyst to stimulate investigation. According to al-Ghazālī, the senses comprised a source of human knowledge; as he concluded, however, this source did not have to be infallible and indeed, could not be in its deliverances in order to qualify as a wellspring of authentic knowledge.

As we have seen, al-Ghazālī's repeated comparison of things sensed to dreams and his warning that "there is no reliance (*wa-lā thiqa*) at all for a man on his sense (*bi-ḥissihi*)," serves to highlight the care that must be taken with beliefs based on sense-data, when converting sense perceptions into sensory evidence concerning either what has been seen or heard or felt or tasted or smelled, or what will be the case with respect to those specific sensations at some future point in time. Belief about sensibles is not knowledge without further observation and/or rational confirmation. Once sensory information is buttressed in these ways, however, then these data can become "facts of sensation" and can be available potentially for use as premises in proof procedures. In this way sense-data can and must play a role in a more comprehensive epistemological system. By their nature, nevertheless, sensation-based premises are "those about which there can be error." As a result, the truth of the conclusion of any empirical argument is conditional and never absolute (*muṭlāq*), that is to say, true in every possible case. Additionally, there are cases in which even though the premises of the proof are factually true, errors in reasoning can occur; in this case, the argument will prove nothing. Mindful of this pitfall, al-Ghazālī cautioned that "every syllogism (*fa-kull qiyās*) that is not [built up] [either] by the ordering of necessary premises (*bi-nizām muqaddimāt ḍarūriyāt*) or by the [correct] ordering of premises deduced from 'necessaries' (*mustantajat min ḍarūriyāt*) contains no proof (*fa-lā ḥujjat fihi*)."<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> abū Hāmid Muḥammad al-Ghazālī, *Mihakk al-naẓar fi'l-manṭiq*, ed., M. al-Naʿsani (Beirut: Dār al-nahdat al-ḥadītha, 1966) [hereafter *Mihakk*], 59, lines 5-15 discusses the external, physical senses from the viewpoint of their service as sources of *yaqīn* and *ʿitiqād*. See *Miʿyār*, 142, lines 4-13, 143, lines 1-14 where al-Ghazālī explained that the premisses of a syllogism can be drawn from four different sources, including the first truths

### III. *The Critique of the Axiomata of Reason in the Munqidh min al-dalāl*

Al-Ghazālī's initial crisis also involved formal knowledge; let us examine then how he carried forth his search to discover an absolutely secure foundation for knowledge, namely, a cognitive source which would be able to guarantee the certain truth of its deliverances. He turned to the human intellect in order to see whether or not the truths of reason possessed his requisite hallmarks of certitude and freedom from error. Al-Ghazālī's intellectual verities were the first principles of reason or the primary truths of the intellect. Defined as "the firsts" or *al-awwalīyāt*, they comprised necessary knowledge (*al-ʿilm al-ḍarūrī*). The necessary "cognitions" or "knowledges" (*ʿulūm*) equaled the self-evident truths of the intellect, for these were the verities that "imposed such a compulsion upon the creature's soul that the creature, once it [this truth] is had, cannot escape it, or be separated from it, or entertain any doubt or suspicion about [its] term of reference."<sup>13</sup> The *awwalīyāt* were by definition the *ḍarūrīyāt* or those items of knowledge which are "necessary," in the sense that once the sound mind grasps them, it must accept them as categorically true and certain. As al-Ghazālī exemplified them, the first principles are analytic propositions: "ten are more than three"; "the same thing cannot be both affirmed and denied simultaneously"; "one thing is not both generated in time and eternal."<sup>14</sup> The primary, self-evident, necessary truths of the intellect, for al-Ghazālī, are those *a priori* verities that relate to the structure of the relationships between or among concepts; they are therefore examples of formal knowledge.

His quest for indubitable veracity in this domain of formal knowledge likewise proved fruitless. He subjected the primary truths to an inquiry which in its aim resembled his investigation of sense perception. The first truths of reason, too, were found to constitute potentially dubitable bases of certain human knowledge. Al-Ghazālī explained that since his "reliance on sense-perception [*al-mahsūsāt*]" also has been destroyed, perhaps I can rely only upon those verities of reason which belong to the category of primary truths [*illā bi'l-ʿaqlīyāt allati hiya min al-awwalīyāt*], such

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of reason (*al-awwalīyāt al-ʿaqlīya*) and the physical senses (*al-mahsūsāt*) which he discussed in the cited passages. Also see *Miʿyār*, 31, lines 1-10, 32, lines 1-4. *Faḍāʾih*, 84, lines 13-17; *Faḍāʾih*, 85, lines 16-22.

<sup>13</sup> *Tamhīd*, 7, par. 9, lines 2-4.

<sup>14</sup> All of the necessary cognitions (*al-ʿulūm al-ḍarūrīyāt*) of the intellect, according to al-Ghazālī, were grasped as certain and without doubt (*muḥaqqaqan min ghayr shakk*). *Ihyāʾ* 1:1, 22, lines 28-29. See also *Munqidh*, 12, lines 17-19. Cf. *Ihyāʾ* 1:1, 76, lines 1-4; *Ihyāʾ* 1:1, 77, lines 25-28; *Mishkāt*, 48, lines 10-15.



as our asserting that ‘ten are more than three,’ and ‘one thing cannot be simultaneously affirmed and denied,’ . . . Then sense-perception replied: ‘what assurance do you have that your reliance on truths of reason is not like your reliance on sense-perception? Indeed, you used to have confidence in me.’ Continuing to engage in his recollected internal debate, al-Ghazālī emphasized the role that reason played in assessing sense observation: “then, the reason-judge [*hākīm al-‘aql*] came along and gave me the lie; and if it were not for the reason-judge, then you would still accept me as true.” [sect. I] In the same way, consequently, another epistemological situation may obtain. He hypothesized: “so perhaps there may be, beyond the perception of reason [*warā’ a idrāk al-‘aql*], another judge. And if the latter revealed itself, it would give the lie to reason in its judgement, just as the reason-judge revealed itself and gave the lie to the judgement of sense. The mere fact of the non-appearance of that [supra-intellectual] perception does not prove the impossibility of its existence [*lā yadullu ‘alā istiḥālātihi*].<sup>15</sup> [sect. II]

The preceding text is difficult to understand, chiefly but not exclusively because it asserts the possibility of a potential falsifier of reason. Two separate currents of thought, the Sufi and the philosophical, I would argue, are intertwined in al-Ghazālī’s critique of the necessary, self-evident and primary truths of reason. Nowhere in the *Munqidh min al-dalāl* is their connection so limpid as in the following passage:

And my soul hesitated about the answer to that objection, and sense-data heightened the difficulty by referring to dreams. ‘Do you not see’, it said, ‘how, when you are asleep that you believe certain things and imagine certain circumstances, and believe that they are stable and enduring, and, while you are in this dream-state, have no doubt about them? And is it not the case that when you awake you know that all your imaginings and beliefs were groundless and useless? Why then are you confident that all your waking beliefs, whether from sense or [from] intellect [*bi-ḥiss aw ‘aql*], are genuine? They are true [only] in respect of your present state; but it is possible that a state will come upon you whose relation to your waking consciousness is like the relation of the latter to dreaming. In comparison with this state your waking consciousness would be like dreaming’!<sup>16</sup> [sect. III]

Before we examine these passages, it would be wise to set them into the larger intellectual environment that surrounds al-Ghazālī’s quite complicated perspective on the first principles of reason and their derived cognitions.

<sup>15</sup> *Munqidh*, 12, lines 16-19, 13, lines 1-4. See *Mishkāṭ*, 77, lines 18-19, 78, lines 1-2.

<sup>16</sup> *Munqidh*, 13, lines 5-11. See *Fadā’ih*, 90, lines 12-18.

The decade between 461/1068-1069 and 471/1078-1079 comprises the most likely time span in which he gained an elementary familiarity with the ideas and practices of Sufism. Al-Ghazālī's early experiences with Sufism provided the framework of his critique of the primary rational truths, one that would be repeated consistently throughout his corpus. Al-Ghazālī likely came into the circle of his initial spiritual director at Tus, al-Nassāj, in order to seek advice on the meaning of his dreams. Internal promptings of the sort which al-Ghazālī surely had begun to experience and remember as dreams were interpreted ordinarily as signs of the connection between the physical and unseen realms. Al-Nassāj's first efforts with al-Ghazālī then consisted in "polishing" this young man's character so that he might hear what had begun to resonate in his heart. At this stage, al-Nassāj tutored him in the commonly known vocabulary and images of Sufism: the heart, for example, as a "mirror" which required polishing in order to remove the stains of worldly existence. One traditional purpose of the ascetic disciplinary endeavor consisted in cleansing the mirror of the heart for the purpose of allowing the reflection or image of God to emerge. Indeed, the happiness and perfection of the searcher's soul depended upon "purging the soul of its bad dispositions which are owed to concupiscence and irascibility." By following the way of purgation and by engaging in interior combat (*al-mujāhada*) to efface blamable character traits, the novice thus began his attempt to draw near to God.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> *Ithāf*, 1:9-11. The heart was likened to a "mirror" on which surface knowledge of God would be reflected. Knowledge of God, of His attributes, and of His works forms part of the *'ilm al-mukāshafa*. With the advent of this knowledge, "the covering is removed so that the truth concerning these things becomes as clear as if it were seen by the eye, leaving thereby, no room for any doubt (*lā shakk fīhī*)" (*Ihyā'* 1:1, 18, lines 33-34). *'Ilm al-mukāshafa* "is a light that shines in the heart when it has been cleansed and purified of its blameworthy attributes" (*Ihyā'* 1:1, 18, lines 18-19). Al-Ghazālī affirmed that accession to such knowledge "would be innately possible for man (*wa hadhā mumkin fī jawhar al-insān*), if not (*lawlā*) for the fact that rust and rot from the filth of the world herebelow had accumulated on the surface of the mirror of [his] heart (*mir'ah al-qalb*)" (*Ihyā'*, line 35). Purification of the heart's mirror was dependent upon character reform. See *Ihyā'* 1:1, 10, lines 11-20 for an enumeration of the blameworthy qualities which a man had to banish from his heart. Polishing the mirror of the heart equaled the effort to modify or restrain, if not conquer completely, culpable character traits. By the phrase "knowledge of the road of the hereafter" (*'ilm ṭarīq al-ākhirā*), al-Ghazālī meant "the knowledge of how to polish the surface of this mirror of this filth which is the barrier (*hijāb*) to [knowing] God most high and most exalted and to a knowledge (*ma'rifa*) of His attributes and His works" (*Ihyā'* 1:1, 19, lines 1-2). *Mizān*, 39, lines 13-16, 40, lines 1-5; *Mizān*, 40, lines 11-15; *Mizān*, 43, lines 7-10, 14-16, 44, lines 1-4.

The effort to refine one's character depended first upon discerning the unworthy traits present in one's self. Al-Ghazālī identified four methods through which character flaws could be recognized. The first consisted in keeping company with a spiritual guide, "a

Waking life and its realities portrayed as a “dream” in comparison to the life after death also constituted a common Sufi metaphor. In addition, the idea of “Truth” being revealed through dreams was a well-known vehicle for expressing one of the non-sensible ways in which human beings could acquire incontrovertible knowledge about a future entity or event. Al-Ghazālī recognized the need to seek advice on the meaning of his dreams because he learned that “what is conferred by inspiration (*al-wahy*) in sleeping vision or [in] dreams requires interpretation,” as he explained in the *Faḍāʾih*. While the extant sources yield no information about the character and specific content of al-Ghazālī’s dreams during this time span, we may still ask whether these dreams, which evidently tormented him enough to prompt him to seek out a spiritual guide, reflected a brewing tension between the demands of his intellect and the yearnings of his heart? Did al-Nassāj comfort this young man by advising him of the relation between the intellectual and spiritual domains as well as of the harmony that could obtain between the two? Would that we knew more about the content of al-Ghazālī’s dreams in this period!

Al-Ghazālī may have begun his odyssey toward attaining knowledge of God who is *al-Ḥaqq*, the Truth and the Reality, by the time he entered school, for it was there that the seeds of an understanding, of a knowledge, beyond that of this world, were planted. The elder al-Ghazālī had possessed the simple, but well-informed, piety that characterized the devout in the northeastern Persian sector of the ‘Abbāsīd caliphate by the first half of the fifth/eleventh century. The seeds of an attraction to the popular mysticism which suffused his natal region, then, may have been sown even earlier than his first school years either before his father’s death or during the years that he and his younger brother, Aḥmad, spent in the care of the trusted Sufi friend to whom their father had confided their care, along with the modest inheritance which he had left for his two sons’ education. It is impossible to determine precisely when his fascination with popular Sufism began; we know, however, that Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad al-Ghazālī early on was sympathetic to Sufism’s aspirations and that he evidently wished to share in the intimate glimpses of the Divine that Sufism promised. While al-Ghazālī’s individual experiences along the road to certain knowledge were uniquely

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learned man of the hereafter.” The shaykh’s role in identifying and then helping the seeker to eliminate his character defects is primary, particularly because most individuals do not know the diseases of the soul which result from bad character. Progress along the way of purgation demands a guide, lest one be led astray by the whisperings of Satan. See *Iḥyāʾ* 3:2, 56 for some of the attributes that distinguish the true spiritual guide.

his own, his desires reflected the Muslim community's thirst for a closer and more personal experience of God than the increasingly legalistic orientation of mid-to-late fifth/eleventh century Islam could offer.

Popular dissatisfaction with the cut-and-dried approach to Islam of the legists probably sparked an upsurge of public interest in the knowledge of God that the "men of the spirit" claimed to convey. Khurasan's soil early provided very fertile ground for the rapid spread of ascetic mysticism. Knowledge of Sufism's aims, methods, images, terms of expression—if not of its practice—diffused widely among members of all social classes. It is not surprising then to find al-Ghazālī, as a son of this soil, questioning rational knowledge and structuring his criticisms of it by referring to the polarity of waking consciousness and somnolence. It is also not surprising to find that he chose vision as his focus in the sphere of the senses and within the domain of the intellect, as this physical sense most clearly conveyed the qualities of knowledge that the Sufis most esteemed, namely, clarity and immediacy, that is, the evident-ness of what is known (seen) by the knower.

Certain features of Sufism's evolution of a doctrine of esoteric knowledge (*maʿrifa*), which the mystics ultimately erected in opposition to rational knowledge (*ʿilm*), had appealed to al-Ghazālī from his boyhood days. The Sufis sought access to a special, divinely-revealed, non-intellectual knowledge of God. Additionally, Sufism promoted practical regimens whereby pious Muslims could deepen their emotional ties to God by "recollecting" Him in their daily lives. The young al-Ghazālī eagerly sought to know how the adept should prepare himself for the possible receipt of this privileged knowledge. He learned that the aspirant to *maʿrifa* must ready himself for its arrival in this way: "through simple purification, and by presenting ardor, sincere will, and total yearning, as well as by continually lying in wait for the mercy to which God Most High will expose him." Al-Ghazālī explained this process of abnegation in greater detail: the adept "first, must sever all of his worldly attachments and empty his heart completely of them and second, must extinguish his concern for family, property, and offspring, as well as for fatherland, learning, power, and fame; much more [it is required that he] bring his heart to a state in which it is indifferent to the existence and non-existence of everything." After this, he must "sit down alone and unceasingly say aloud 'Allāh,' 'Allāh' without interruption concomitantly with the presence of his heart until he falls silent and sees the word as if it were flowing on his tongue. This he endures patiently until its trace disappears from his tongue and he finds that his heart

steadfastly is applied to the recollection of God [*dhikr*]. This he must patiently endure until . . . the meaning of the word remains bare in his heart, present in it as if it were clinging to it. . . ." Even though the adept might fail in his search to attain esoteric knowledge, the régime itself held purgative value. Sufism's urging of the simple and pious remembrance (*dhikr*) of God stimulated character reform because it worked to purify a person's heart of unworthy motives as well as to prompt an internal critique. Self-criticism was enjoined in order to safeguard the individual from self-deception and pride. This route to esoteric knowledge involved self-abnegation, called for imitation of praiseworthy character traits, demanded strict training, and was not to be undertaken without spiritual tutelage: "the mirror [of the heart] is cleansed and purified by desisting from lust and emulating the prophets in all their states. Thus to whatever extent the heart is cleansed and made to face the Truth, to the same extent will it reflect His Reality. But there is no way to this except (*wa lā sabīl ilāhi illā*) through discipline, learning, and instruction."<sup>18</sup>

Sufism's theosophy focused on *ma'rifa*, an inner "lived" or experiential knowledge. Precisely because it was "lived," *ma'rifa* was understood to carry the stamp of self-verifying intuitive certainty and infallibility. *Ma'rifa* was a uniquely privileged mystic knowledge, the content of which was utterly different in character from intellectual knowledge. By al-Ghazālī's time, theosophic Sufism's doctrine of *ma'rifa*, with the promise it held out of an intuitive grasp of things divine, exerted a powerful pull on men's minds and religious emotions. The contrast between this esoteric knowledge that was thought to lie beyond even the suspicion of doubt and the products of the process of discursive reasoning—which could and did vary—was stark and seductive. Coupled with Islam's traditional pious emphasis upon the overarching power of God (*qudrat Allāh*), Sufi intuitionism operated to raise the prospect of a knowledge by virtue of which mystics could apprehend things that did "not accord with the data of the intellect."

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<sup>18</sup> Aḥmad al-Ghazālī (d. 520/1126), a famous mystic in his own right, composed the *Sawānīḥ*, poetic meditations upon the Sufi theme of love (*ʿishq*; *maḥabba*; *ḥubb*). See *Sawānīḥ: Aphorismen über die Liebe*, ed. H. Ritter (Istanbul and Leipzig: F. A. Brockhaus, 1942); German trans. R. Gramlich, *Gedanken über die Liebe* (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1977). "Life," 75. See complete passage in *Iḥyāʾ* 3:1, 16, lines 30-35, 17, lines 1-5. This abridges a section in *Mizān* where al-Ghazālī clarified the methodological differences between the Sufi and the rational routes to knowledge-acquisition. See *Mizān*, 43-46. *Iḥyāʾ* 1:1, 19, lines 2-4.

Against the shining exemplar of *ma'rifa* disclosed through *kashf* or "unveiling," the Sufis proclaimed that the intellect was irrelevant. So too, for some, was the Shari'a. Disparagement of the intellect and its capacities was a commonly sounded theme within the Sufi tradition. Sufi esoteric knowledge was intuitive and patently was not the fruit of any intellectual or dialectical activity. Of what cognitive value were proofs and reasoned arguments in the face of *ma'rifa*, for in the instant when Being was revealed in its own light, there was no need to demonstrate it. As an early Sufi devotee declaimed: "when the Truth becomes manifest, reason [*ʿaql*] retreats. . . ."<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> By contrast, al-Ghazālī maintained that obedience to the prescriptions and proscriptions of the Shari'a constituted the first stage for the novice who was searching for God, see *Mizān*, 204-206. No matter how far along the road to God the seeker had travelled, he was still bound by the strictures of the revealed Law in al-Ghazālī's view. Even the most advanced adept was required to adhere to the Law: "Know that if one were to observe a man walking on water; [and] if this observation contradicts religious law prescriptions, then it is necessary to hold that it is a devil [and not a man.]" As al-Ghazālī explained, "and this is the truth. The Shar' is supple and tolerant. When the need is felt or when necessity demands, the Law displays some flexibility. Thus, the one who goes beyond this flexibility will have acted not out of necessity but at the instigation of a passion or by concupiscence (*bal 'an hawā wa shahwa*)" (*Mizān*, 206, lines 9-14). Al-Ghazālī reserved the most severe physical punishment for the purported mystic who disregarded the strictures of the Law. An alleged traveller along the path of Sufism, he wrote, may pretend that "he has attained a state of intimacy with God Most High which dispenses him from the canonical prayer and allows him to drink wine and to commit sins and to accept the Sultan's largesse. Such a person is undoubtedly one who ought to be killed, . . . Killing such a one is better than killing one hundred unbelievers, since the harm he does to religion is greater. And consequently [as a result of his action], a door to licentiousness is opened which cannot be closed" (*Fayṣal*, 197, lines 4-8).

Reason (*ʿaql*) was restricted in its capacity to perceive or grasp things divine; as a result, the knowledge acquired by means of "unveiling" was superior to that which was earned through intellectual inquiry and investigation. The knowledge of the perfect man, the Prophet Muḥammad, was "unlettered," (Q. 7:158 where he is called "the unlettered Prophet, *al-nabī al-ummī*," since it came from God and was neither the product of books, nor of study, nor of reflection, and speculative consideration). Some within the Sufi tradition highlighted the non-bookish quality of the Prophet's learning in order to support their stand against reason's value in knowing God. Jalāl al-dīn al-Rūmī (d. 672/1273) advised the seeker to "notice in your heart the Prophet's knowledge, without book, without teacher, without instructor." Quoted in I. Goldziher, *Introduction to Islamic Theology and Law*, tr. A. and R. Hamori (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1981) [hereafter *Introduction*], 153 and n. 122.

Others took a less extreme position on this question of the worth of reason as an instrument through which one could acquire knowledge of God. While the Shaykh al-akbār Ibn 'Arabī refused to negate the utility of rational knowledge in this pursuit, he did explain that "when the heart is safe from reflective consideration, then, according to both the Law and reason, it is unlettered and receptive toward the divine opening in the most perfect manner and without delay. It is provided with God-given (*ladunī*) knowledge in all things to an extent unknown except to a prophet or one of His friends

Sufi elevation of ecstatic mystical knowledge to the utter disdain of rational knowledge precipitated al-Ghazālī's crisis of confusion. His dilemma can be dissected into its two component parts. For al-Ghazālī, on the one hand, there existed the certain knowledge borne of "lived" spiritual experience. This knowledge neither could be verified objectively nor evaluated—nor, at times, even communicated cogently. On the other hand, there stood intellectual knowledge. This knowledge, which was deemed as necessarily worthy of pursuit, was praised as noble in the Qur'ān. Rational knowledge however could be doubted in both its source, *ʿaql*, as well as in reason's discursive operations. These then comprised the twin elements of al-Ghazālī's paradox.

Before the end of the third/ninth century, the learned of the Muslim community had begun to manifest a general wariness about and a distaste for the explosive proclamations of the "intoxicated" mystics. They feared imbalance in the personal search for God. One reason for concern was precisely the fact that the truth of the mystics' *maʿrifā* could not be known objectively. In a theological and legal system whose credal beliefs about God were revealed authoritatively in sacred Scripture and whose interpretations of what God commanded and prohibited were knowable through the rational construction of Muslim jurisprudence, esoteric knowledge founded in the individual was dangerous. Serving the Muslim community's members as their belief-system's guardians and exegetes, the *ʿulamāʾ* recognized not only *maʿrifā*'s potential for harm, but perhaps, their own inability to deal with this problem easily.

Al-Ghazālī's initial foundationalist agenda prompted him to establish a set of requirements for knowledge about the world that was absolutely certain and theoretically fail proof. Quite aware that seeing is not always believing, he next argued that sense perception by itself could not serve as the basis for certain, self-evident, knowledge-claims about the mate-

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whom He has given it as if through tasting. Through this knowledge the degree and plane of faith are perfected. Through it the one who receives it becomes aware of the correctness and the mistakes of reflective powers and in what respect soundness and disorder are attributed to them. All of this comes from God." Quoted in W. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983) [hereafter *Sufi Path*], 236.

Some mystics even saw the actions of "breaking the ink-pots and tearing the books" as the deeds which comprised their initial endeavor on the road to *maʿrifā*. See A. Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975) [hereafter *Dimensions*], 17. Some Sufis also engaged in a similar disparagement of the revealed religious Law. See the provocative statements quoted in F. Rahman, *Islam*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 138-42 and in *Introduction*, 150-54. Quoted in *Introduction*, 154 and nn. 126, 127.

rial universe. There is little new or exceptional in his discussion of unaided sense. As a source of true cognition, sense deliverances alone are valueless at worst, and at best, are merely presumptive of genuine knowledge about a phenomenon, event, or entity. Not wishing to invalidate wholly the senses as a cognitive resource, however, al-Ghazālī strongly affirmed that the senses, when correctly integrated with the intellect, could produce reliably effective, but not inviolably secure and utterly fail proof, claims to knowledge about the physical realm as it presently exists. Sense knowledge claims, of course, always can be proven false by reference to other world scenarios as well as to time.

Turning his eye toward the intellect as the source of unquestionably true and certain judgements, al-Ghazālī retained this foundationalist program and erected an apparently “evil demon” construct under which even the conceptual truths of reason might be proven false. Unlike Descartes’ use of a similar falsifier of knowledge in which the worst possible epistemic scenario is envisioned, al-Ghazālī’s analytical construct is not simply a potentially endless “what if” structure. Logical possibility alone did stimulate al-Ghazālī to ask: what if there were a further standpoint from which to look back at rational truths? Yet, his was not empty speculation since he recognized the theoretical possibility of a higher, mystical knowledge, the receipt of which could falsify the normal and ordinarily reliable deliverances of the healthy human intellect, even the “primary” ones.

Al-Ghazālī suggested that this state (*ḥāl*) of supra-intellectual apprehension might be that which the Sufis claimed as theirs. In standard Sufi terminology, the *ḥāl* was a gift of God. It did not result from the individual’s personal striving or effort *fī sabīl Allāh*, “along the path of God”; rather, reaching this spiritual state depended not upon the mystic but upon God. According to Ghazālīan doctrine, in this ecstatic state where sensation is suspended, the Sufis “witness phenomena which do not accord with these data of the intellect” (*al-maʿqūlāt*).<sup>20</sup> Far from

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<sup>20</sup> Underlining the obdurate arrogance of some who explosively proclaimed their union with God (*ittihād*) and direct vision (*mushāhada*) of Him, al-Ghazālī wrote “no matter how much their claims are disproven, they do not hesitate to say that such disproof has been the product of rational knowledge and argument (*al-ʿilm waʿl-jadal*)—rational knowledge is a veil and disputation is a work of the self. [They nonetheless state that] the meaning of their words is not disclosed except from within (*illā min al-bātin*) through unveiling by the light of the Truth (*bi-mukāshafa nūr al-ḥaqq*).” *Iḥyāʾ* 1: 1, 32, lines 24-28. *Munqidh*, 12, line 19, 13, lines 1-2; *Ibid.*, lines 2-12. *Munqidh*, 13, lines 11-12. This knowledge, al-Ghazālī explained, falls suddenly into a man’s heart without any learning process (*al-taʿallum*) or effort on his part at all, so much so that he does not even know



attempting to defeat knowledge, al-Ghazālī here looked toward a better possible epistemological situation and asked whether, from the perspective of the *ḥāl* of *maʿrifa*, rational verities could be unstable. Apart from the ecstatic state, however, did al-Ghazālī doubt the veracity of the primary truths in a substantive and real fashion? Under the usual operating circumstances of this world, can the statement, for example, “one person cannot be in two places at the same time” ever be false?

Without doubt, the work of reconstructing al-Ghazālī’s early life and thought for the purpose of investigating the epistemological doctrine that took shape gradually and continued to evolve and re-form itself over the course of his entire lifespan is difficult because the sources are meager, the chronological indices are few, and the data contained therein are sometimes contradictory. Moreover, the questions that al-Ghazālī raised and the profoundly philosophical and religious issues with which he grappled in the *Munqidh min al-ḍalāl* are never fully investigated in a systematic manner in that work. In order to resolve, albeit tentatively, how al-Ghazālī thought about the elemental problem of the necessary first truths of reason and the cognitions derived from the primary verities, as he broached this problem in his autobiography, I propose to turn to another of his texts written in roughly the same time span as the *Munqidh min al-ḍalāl*, the *Mishkāt al-anwār* [Niche for lights]. The *Mishkāt* seems a perfectly complementary choice because in that text the mystical and philosophical perspectives on knowledge are interwoven in much the same way as they are in the *Munqidh*, although the former volume is more clearly a text that expresses a mysticism-infused understanding of God, particularly when he discusses the famed *āyat al-nūr* [the “Light Verse”] of the Qurʾān (24:35). Both of these volumes were published contemporaneously, possibly within one year of one another, and certainly, within a few short years of each other; it is likely that the *Mishkāt* appeared first, “un peu avant 500/1106-1107,” while the *Munqidh* was written no earlier than the opening of 500 A.H., 2 September 1106. Both texts were composed long after al-Ghazālī’s definitive “turning toward God” or *tawba*, which, at the earliest, took place during the final day of Dhūʾl-ḥijja 488/30 December 1095.<sup>21</sup>

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how or from where he attains the item of knowledge. Knowledge acquired in this way belonged to the Sufis, those who have purified themselves through following an ascetic regimen, and to the Saints. See *Ihyāʾ* 3:1, 16, lines 10-14. With the advent of this knowledge, “the covering is removed so that the truth concerning these things becomes as clear as if it were seen by the eye, thereby leaving no room for any doubt (*lā yashukku fīhi*).” *Ihyāʾ* 1:1, 18, lines 33-34. *Munqidh*, 13, lines 12-14.

<sup>21</sup> *Essai de chronologie*, 66; 70-71, *Freedom*, xxv. See above, 44-45, 52-53.

These two sources are late in provenance and as such, they reflect their author's look backward at his past in order to ascertain, I suggest, the genesis of the "knowledge-problem" that preoccupied him for the major portion of his adult life, no matter whether the knowledge in question were rational or salvific. Al-Ghazālī was casting his eye backward toward his youth in a genuine attempt to convey as candidly as he could to his co-religionists, within the pages of his autobiography, what he had experienced personally in his search for true knowledge. As an adolescent, al-Ghazālī was clearly fascinated with Sufism of the commonplace variety. This familiar Sufism captured his spirit at this youthful stage in his life, and as he gazed backward, his recounting of his past with its initial epistemological crisis tried to recapture his mental universe as he recalled it from a chronologically distant vantage point.

While the problems attached to the *Munqidh min al-ḍalāl* as a literary and historical source are several, these difficulties do not diminish its value as a first-person account of al-Ghazālī's life. It is the only source of this type that we possess, and in the same way as scholars have judged its veracity or lack thereof in reference to his life's details, as well as in relationship to the ideas expressed, we must attempt to amplify the philosophical positions at which he hinted in ways that aim at explaining them in such a manner that they are cohesive and cohere as seamlessly as possible with what we know and accept as al-Ghazālī's authentic teaching on key epistemological issues. One should remember that al-Ghazālī is addressing his fellow Muslims as Muslims, rather than as peers, in the mastery of a wide variety of the Islamic and foreign sciences. This is exactly the reason why, particularly when he investigates the axiomata of reason and the cognitions derived from them in isolation from as well as in juxtaposition with Sufi esoteric knowledge, he raises certain questions but does not explore them in a systematic and detailed manner in the *Munqidh min al-ḍalāl*.

In this text, he was interested chiefly in raising key issues and in briefly—often confusingly—responding to them. Two critical questions in particular are initiated but not examined fully in his autobiographical memoir: al-Ghazālī asked first whether the receipt of mystic knowledge was possible [sect. I] and if so, what the purported content of this knowledge might be [sect. II]; and second, what the relationship between advanced enlightenment and the knowledge resulting from the standard human cognitive equipment of sense and reason likely might be [sect. III]. His replies to both of these questions are set against the background of a communally as well as personally felt interest in Sufi esoteric knowledge. For those issues that the *Munqidh* only broached but

never fully explored, recourse must be had to other of his texts in which the needed explication is given. How did al-Ghazālī explain axiomatic knowledge and derived cognitions?

Al-Ghazālī exemplified the ideal human epistemological case by investigating the situation of the person in the condition of full wakefulness. Here, the individual who possesses a sound, healthy intellect that is free from defect is alive to and cognizant of both what is external to himself as well as his internal psychical states.<sup>22</sup> He inquired into the relationship between the “eye” of the sense (*baṣar*) and the “eye” of reason, the “insight” (*baṣīra*) in the *Mishkāt*. According to him, the physical eye was narrow in its apprehensive scope: “it sees others but not itself. Again, it does not see what is very distant, nor what is very near, nor what is behind a veil. . . . It makes many mistakes in its seeing, for what is large appears to its vision small; what is far, near; what is at rest, at motion; what is in motion, at rest.” Even more insistent still concerning its limitations, he wrote: “[this] eye sees only a fraction of what exists, for all concepts . . . are beyond its vision; neither does it apprehend the percipient faculties, by which I mean the faculties of hearing, of smelling, of tasting; nay, all the inner psychical qualities are unseen to it, joy, pleasure, displeasure, grief, pain, . . . love, . . . power, will, knowledge, and innumerable other existences. Thus, . . . it is unable to pass the confines of the world of color and form, which are the grossest of all entities.”<sup>23</sup>

By contrast, the sphere of the “eye” of the intellect included “the entirety of existence, for it both apprehends the entities we have enumerated, and has free course among all others beside (and they are the major part), passing upon them judgements that are both certain and true.” But as al-Ghazālī explained further: “while the [eye of the] intellect of man does truly see, the things it sees are not all upon the same plane. Its knowledge is in some cases, so to speak, given, that is present in the intellect, as in the case of axiomatic truths, e.g., that the same thing cannot be both eternal and created; or existent and non-existent; or that the same proposition cannot be both true and false; or that the judgement that is true of one thing is true of an identically similar thing;

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<sup>22</sup> *Maqṣād*, 43, lines 1-5, *Burrell*, 31. There is no room for error in this type of cognition of one’s self (*lā yajūzu fīhī al-khaṭaʾ*). It is certain, since a man perceives his psychic qualities immediately, without intermediary, by experiencing directly his inward aspect.

<sup>23</sup> *Mishkāt*, 43, lines 8-12. See *Mishkāt*, 45-47 where al-Ghazālī listed seven defects of the physical eye and compared the imperfection of physical sight (*baṣr*) to the perfection of the “eye” and insight of the intellect (*baṣīra*). For him, reason transcended all the manifold errors and incapacities of the physical eye. *Mishkāt*, 45, lines 9-18.

or that, granted the existence of the particular, the existence of the universal must follow necessarily.”<sup>24</sup> These *a priori* intuitive truths of reason exemplify the verities that must be accepted as certain and necessary by the sane person who possesses a healthy and strong intellect.

There are other propositions, nonetheless, which are not comprised within the category of the axiomata of reason. These are theorems of speculation or propositions that are not “first principles” themselves, but which are derived from speculation (*al-nazarīyāt*): “other propositions, again, do not find the intellect invariably with them, when they recur to it, but [these] have to shake reason up, arouse it, strike flint upon steel, in order to elicit the intellect’s spark . . . to apprehend which the intelligence has to be aroused by the *kalām* of the philosophers. . . . Now the greatest of philosophies is the *kalām Allāhi*. . . . Therefore the verses of the Qur’ān, in relation to the intellect, have the value of sunlight in relation to the sight of the eye, to wit, it is by this sunlight that the act of seeing is accomplished.”<sup>25</sup>

On the question of derived cognitions, al-Ghazālī therefore maintained that inference and speculative reflection can provide true, reliable knowledge. The items of information that reason produces through its discursive operations therefore may meet the Ghazālīan standard of knowledge. In the case of derived cognitions, however, the intellect must know how to evaluate inferential claims soundly. “The intelligence has to be aroused,” he asserted, and that stimulation occurs first through the acquisition of adequate instruction in the correct rules and appropriate forms of logical argumentation. Once attained, reason then uses logic as the balance by which it weighs the various speculations produced, in the attempt to see whether any, or some, or all, amount to items of true knowledge.

The linkage between a strictly rational epistemology and one that rested squarely within the framework of essential Muslim belief comes to the fore in the preceding passage wherein the framework of analysis shifts to the specifically religious background against which the spiritually awakened al-Ghazālī came to understand the purposes of rational knowledge. While he always retained his belief in the “three fundamentals” of Islam, in the period of his initial epistemic crisis, al-Ghazālī had not yet formulated his final understanding of the relationship between faith and reason. The evolution of that doctrine toward its ultimate

<sup>24</sup> *Mishkāṭ*, 45, line 18, 46, lines 1-2; *Mishkāṭ*, 48, lines 10-15.

<sup>25</sup> *Mishkāṭ*, 49, lines 1-7.

stage of development began after he had completed his professional education and had embarked upon his professorial career, in other words, this likely occurred no earlier than his appointment by Nizām al-Mulk to the Nizāmīya *madrasa* at Baghdad in Jumādā I 484, July of 1091.

Al-Ghazālī's later teaching clarified a concept which remained embryonic in his youthful period of skeptical confusion, namely, the idea that Revelation gave to intellectual work its ideal form and purpose, since Sacred Scripture contained all that was categorically true about God, man, and the physical universe. The Qur'ānic perspective wholly encompassed all sorts of knowledge, but Scripture classified knowledge as either laudable or blameworthy in view of the particular aim of salvation. In relation to the attainment of that goal in the Hereafter, knowledge of God, of His attributes, and of His works alone mattered. In the Herebelow, by contrast, diverse sorts of knowledge were required and each was assessed against a usable, earthly, means-to-end yardstick.

In the much earlier time-span of his initial crisis of knowledge (likely before 471/14 July 1078-3 July 1079) as a consequence, al-Ghazālī distrusted the deliverances of his senses as well as of his intellect. He did so because he had engaged in a methodological effort to evaluate personally man's twin founts of rational knowledge, sense perception and reason. His assault against rational knowledge was aimed at exposing the defects of sense and reason. It was designed neither to destroy the cognitive value of these two sources nor to make rational knowledge and the certainty and veridicality that, as he affirmed, belonged to *ʿilm*, wholly and singularly contingent upon God's illumination of the human knower's heart, that is, divine revelation. On the contrary, al-Ghazālī sought to achieve another epistemic aim: he intended to ground rational knowledge firmly in the intrinsic (*jawharī*) cognitive equipment of man. Some of the verities of reason did survive al-Ghazālī's scrutiny, although his penetrating attack upon this category of the self-evident rational truths has been sufficient to label him a pervasive skeptic.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Among others, see M. Marmura, "Ghazālī and Demonstrative Science," and more recently in his review of R. M. Frank's *Creation and the Cosmic System: al-Ghazālī* (1992) entitled "Ghazālīan Causes and Intermediaries" in *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 115, no. 1 (1995), 89-100.

IV. *Crisis Resolution: the Restoration of Certainty*

It would have been quite surprising if this sensitive, studious young man, who wandered about on the margins of the local Sufi circles, had voiced his anxieties about what he knew in purely philosophical terms. Later in his life, al-Ghazālī still emphasized this special quality of esoteric knowledge by defining intuitive revelation thusly: “we therefore mean by the science of unveiling (revelation = *bi ‘ilm al-mukāshafa*) [the knowledge through which] the covering is removed so that the truth regarding these things becomes as clear as if it were seen by the eye, thereby leaving no room for doubt (*lā yashukku fihi*).”<sup>27</sup>

Pursuit of this specially privileged knowledge of things divine was fraught with dangers for the individual immature seeker. The celebrated shaykh al-Qushayrī had sounded this alarm in his *Risāla fī ‘ilm al-taṣawwuf*. He believed that beginners laid their minds open to insidious deception (*makran khafīyan*) by following a strenuous and methodical ascetic training. He wrote that they might oscillate wildly between the states of “fear” (*khawf*) and “hope” (*rajāʾ*) in God.<sup>28</sup> In their anxious rush for experience, novices could lose their equilibrium and fail to understand that the soundness of reason, rather than the precipitate ecstasy of “intoxication,” might better describe the faithful servant of God.

Fear of the negative consequences of excess and immoderation, some portion of which he had experienced personally as a younger man during his first crisis of knowledge, later led the older al-Ghazālī to emphasize the need to root mysticism in and have it remain under the control

<sup>27</sup> *Iḥyāʾ* 1:1, 18, lines 33-34.

<sup>28</sup> Passage through the future-oriented states of fear of God’s chastisement and hope of divine mercy in the next world forms part of the required itinerary of the traveller on the road to God. Two other states may supervene and these, contraction (*qabd*) and expansion (*bast*), can seize the neophyte servant’s mind, so that he becomes sick in his heart. Al-Qushayrī explained that “contraction means something which is actually present at the time (*ḥāṣil fīʾl-waqt*); so too, expansion. And the one who is experiencing either fear or hope has his heart fixed on the future; whereas the one who experiences expansion and contraction is presently and actually the prisoner of an overwhelming obsessive mood (*wārid*). . . . There is the greatest danger in this obsessive mood [of expansion] and the one who is open to it should be on his guard against an insidious deception (*makran khafīyan*). One of the Sufis has said: ‘one of the doors of expansion opened out to me. I slipped; thus, the station which I had attained (*maqamī*) at that time was veiled from my sight.’” The Sufis as a result say, “Be leery of expansion and beware of it’. . . . Both conditions . . . must be considered a poor thing and a harmful one if compared with the states which are superior to them.” See ‘Abd al-Karīm ibn Hawāzin al-Qushayrī, *Risāla fī ‘ilm al-taṣawwuf* (Cairo: 1386/1966) [hereafter *Risāla*], 1:55, lines 8-10, 12-14, 19-21; 56, lines 1-9.

of trained reason. As he explained, the extravagances of ascetic discipline endangered the seeker in that “his mental sanity may be adversely affected, his bodily health may be destroyed, and melancholy may ensue.” Al-Ghazālī taught that the mystic, whose religious emotion was untempered by a sound, trained intellect, may deceive himself because “if the soul has not been exercised in the sciences that deal with fact and [with] demonstration, it will acquire mental phantasms and suppose that truths are descending upon it. Many a Sufi has continued for ten years in one such fancy before escaping from it, whereas if he had a sound scientific education, he would have been delivered from it at once.”<sup>29</sup>

As a young man, al-Ghazālī had propelled himself into a general epistemological quandary. His dilemma seemingly implied two questions: (1) is the possibility of receiving *maʿrifa* sufficient to falsify the judicious judgements of reason; (2) if the only true and certain knowledge is that which *maʿrifa* can provide, then is the certainty of the primary intellectual truths (*al-awwalīyāt*) the product of epiphany or ongoing divine illumination? This second question frames the problem of the foundation of invariant and indubitable knowledge; thus, it relates only to first principles, and it does not refer at all to sense perception based-knowledge.

Sensible cognitions can be certain for prediction's sake, but they usually are not invariant. In fact, most display a certain variance, as for example, when, over a very long period of observation, a person knows with certainty that the length of the day varies. This regular variance, which is certain and predictable, can be calculated easily today with the aid of a computer. Let us look a bit more closely at the primary rational verities in order to figure out why, perhaps, al-Ghazālī thought that “the firsts” might not be inviolably certain.

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<sup>29</sup> Al-Ghazālī knew something of the dangers of ascetic immoderation through his experiences during his first crisis of two months' duration, which occurred when he was not more than twenty years' old, and during his second, nearly fatal, crisis which extended over a six month time span, when he was roughly thirty seven to thirty eight years of age. See *Essai de chronologie*, 28-29, sect. 21, for the dating of the *Mizān*. *Mizān*, 51, lines 3-12. Al-Ghazālī advised the novice of some of the dangers involved in failing to pursue a path of moderation: “the extremist is the one whose fear is strong and goes beyond the limit of the equilibrium, so that it [this fear] goes out towards hopelessness and despair [i.e., becomes the state of contraction (*al-qabd*)], see above, n. 28], and it again is reprehensible, because it stultifies action. Fear also may issue in sickness and impotence and mental depression and confusion and intellectual atrophy.” *Ihyāʾ* 4:3, 137, lines 2-4. See also lines 8-10 where death is listed as another possible consequence of unequilibrated fear. The likelihood of self-deceit resulting from exaggerated hope, that is, the adept's unregulated experience of the state of expansion (*al-bast*), is explained in *Mizān*, 46, lines 10-14. *Ihyāʾ* 3:1, 17, lines 16-20 essentially reiterates the same conclusion, but lengthens the term of self-deception to twenty years.

First principles themselves are not absolutely indubitable, as the following example illustrates: all sane persons must agree with the maxim that "two plus two equals four." Now, this is undoubtedly true only if all agree as to what constitutes "two." Is 1.99 "two" or not? If it is not, namely, if there is not universal recognition and acceptance of the representation of "two" in its integer form, then "two plus two" may not equal four and reasonable persons can and do disagree about this precept. The following calculations show the point of disagreement clearly:  $(1.99)^5 = 31.20796$ , but  $(2)^5 = 32.00000$ . The difference is nearly 0.8. When designing a common type of highway bridge, the use of 1.99 instead of two in all calculations likely would not affect the design; in the more lengthy calculations associated with aiming a satellite at Venus, however, the difference could be substantial.

Let us investigate another classic example of a "first truth of reason." All sane persons must agree that "one person cannot be in two places at the same time." Yet, this is not true in the case of a person standing in the intersection of circles A and B, where A and B are presented in the Venn-diagram sense, because the person would be standing in both A and B simultaneously. Al-Ghazālī indicated very clearly in his logical writings the importance that the essential elements of lucid rational thinking, which in his view were fine definition of terms and concepts combined with concurrence about the meaning of those terms and concepts, carried.<sup>30</sup> With these refinements of the rational axiomata in mind, one should accept the certainty of the necessary first principles of reason and try to discover what makes them "certain," as al-Ghazālī ventured to do.

When one explores the second question more fully, the source of the epistemological confusion that al-Ghazālī experienced becomes clear. As a young person poised between adolescence and adulthood, al-Ghazālī framed the "knowledge-problem" in the following way. According to the assertions of Sufism's masters, the intuitive knowledge of the Sufi mystic was unique, irreducible, and immune from error; by contrast, the sense perceptions and conceptual information that men ordinarily

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<sup>30</sup> For example, see *Fayṣal*, 175, lines 11-12 where al-Ghazālī states that "the only thing that will save you from this muddle [of confused wrangling and dissension] is to know the definition (*ḥadd*) and real meaning (*ḥaqīqa*) of [terms] (*al-takdhīb* and *al-taṣdīq*)." He then continues (175-78) to explain very clearly and concisely what he designates as the "grades or ranks" of existent things: "For existence is essential (*dhātī*), sensible (*ḥissī*), imaginative (*khayālī*), rational or conceptual (*ʿaqlī*), and metaphorical (*shibhī*)." After explaining each existential grade, al-Ghazālī proceeds to illustrate each one with reference to the issue of correct interpretation, see 179-184.



possessed were mutable and open to doubt. Al-Ghazālī wanted to discover what a man can know with certitude and how he can know it by using his purely human powers alone.

I would argue, consequently, that the paramount background problem for al-Ghazālī in this time period became the possibility of his personal acquisition of the security afforded by *maʿrifa*. Stated conversely, it became his goal to disprove—or at minimum, to undercut—the certainty, truth, and reliability which Sufi *maʿrifa* purportedly carried. This is the issue that comes to the foreground as the chief problem that pre-occupied al-Ghazālī in his second period of crisis. In the context of his first crisis of knowledge, however, al-Ghazālī did two things. First, he perceived the nature of the difficulty, and second, he realized that any attempt to solve this dilemma would entail taking the critic’s approach and subjecting Sufi *maʿrifa* to certain evidentiary questions. The detailed working out of his solution, nevertheless, began in earnest only many years later, not earlier than the end of Dhū’l-ḥijja 488/30 December 1095, when al-Ghazālī finally resolved to lead the contemplative life.

Let us return to examine how his initial epistemic crisis was resolved. According to the *Munqidh*, “when these thoughts occurred to me they penetrated my soul, and I tried to deal with that [objection]; but it was not easy, since the objection could be refuted only by proof (*illā bi’l-dalīl*). [Sect. I] But the only way to construct a proof was to combine first principles (*illā min tarkīb al-ʿulūm al-awwalīya*). Since these were inadmissible, it was impossible to construct the proof. This sickness was baffling and it lasted for nearly two months, during which I was a skeptic in fact, but neither in theory nor in outward expression.” This skeptical interlude ended when he “once more accepted the necessary truths of the intellect (*al-ḍarūrīyāt al-ʿaqlīya*) and relied on them with safety and certainty (*mawthūqan bihā ʿalā amn wa yaqīn*).” [Sect. II] Finally, as a consequence of God’s curative power, al-Ghazālī’s physical and mental health were restored. How was his cure effected? Al-Ghazālī explained his understanding: “this did not come about through constructing a proof or putting together an argument, but by a light that God Most High cast into my breast. And that light is the key to the greater part of knowledge (*wa dhālika l-nūr huwa miftāḥ akthar al-maʿārif*). And whoever thinks that the unveiling of things divine (*al-kashf*) depends upon strict proofs has in his thought narrowed down the wideness of God’s mercy.”<sup>31</sup> [Sect. III]

<sup>31</sup> Sectional numeration is mine. *Munqidh*, 12, lines 16-19, 13, lines 1-4.

The first two sections of the preceding text emphasize rational knowledge, while the last, by shifting the target, focuses on illumination. In the first section, al-Ghazālī remembered that his enterprise of examining rational knowledge had shown him that both sources of rational knowledge—claims—sense and reason—could be proven false under specific circumstances and conditions.<sup>32</sup> Particularly discomforted by his recognition that the primary truths of reason might be falsified—although for this category of rational verities, al-Ghazālī did not give specific instances of falsification, but simply (and sufficiently) raised the possibility of controversion—al-Ghazālī asked himself if the charge of possible falsification of the necessary verities of the intellect by way of illumination could be rebutted.<sup>33</sup> His response was in the negative.

According to al-Ghazālī, the rational objection could not be formulated to disprove the possibility of acquiring *maʿrifa* precisely because this kind of knowledge was the fruit of the cultivation of inner experience. He could not say with certainty that *maʿrifa* did not exist. If it did, however, then it became impossible for him to conjecture that the axiomata of reason were and always would be invariably true. Al-Ghazālī plainly doubted the foundations of rational knowledge. In the third section, by contrast with the first two, al-Ghazālī subtly shifted his gaze away from consideration of rational supports for rational knowledge. He explored instead divine illumination as the means through which his crisis of rational knowledge was resolved. This re-orientation is striking and it is ambiguous in both its intent and its meaning.

It is tempting to maintain that al-Ghazālī's initial crisis of skepticism developed from his awareness of the possible existence of a higher level of knowledge than reason could provide. Indeed, the whole matter of a "higher knowledge" reverberated in the social contexts of al-Ghazālī's time and place. At this stage in his epistemological confusion, nonetheless, al-Ghazālī did not direct his criticisms toward rational knowledge for the purpose of rendering that knowledge effectively unusable and normally unreliable. Nor did he intend to elevate *maʿrifa* to an unassailably secure position as the exclusive source of utterly certain and invulnerable-to-error knowledge. He sought only to assert the possibility of the advent

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<sup>32</sup> See *Mishkāṭ*, 43, lines 8-12; 47, lines 12-18; *Iḥyāʾ* 1:1 as well as in *Faḍāʾih*, 84-85 (for dream falsification of sense perception and erroneous conclusion drawn from axiomatic precept in addition to faulty comprehension of an intellectual axiom); *Mihakk*, 59, lines 5-15.

<sup>33</sup> *Munqidh*, 12, line 19, 13, lines 1-12 (complete passage); *Mishkāṭ*, 78, lines 1-2 repeats the same question.

of *ma'rifa* to the mystic's heart. Once admitted as a possibility, however, *ma'rifa* necessarily carried specific burdens. One difficulty involved the inevitability of its being compared with rational knowledge.

Al-Ghazālī's youthful crisis resulted from his uncertainties about the relationship between mystical knowledge and ordinary human knowledge. This epistemological trauma also grew out of his nascent recognition that *ma'rifa* and the primary analytic "givens" of reason were both internal to the individual. As a self-authenticating insight, *ma'rifa* was intuition; in a sense, the first principles were intuitive as well. If the *ma'rifa* of the mystic were true and the result neither of self-delusion nor of God's deception, then this special knowledge was indubitably certain and trustworthy, but still not externally verifiable.

Over time, al-Ghazālī became acutely wary of elevating *ma'rifa* above non-mystic knowledge because his epistemic enterprise focused on securing the human cognitive resources of sense and reason—as these function in the domain of everyday human existence—against an esotericizing approach to and skeptical assault upon rational knowledge. Al-Ghazālī's process of awakening to the importance of preserving the reliability and the practical utility of human knowledge-sources and their products emerged in the latter stage of his initial period of skeptical criticism of sense and reason, when he began to suspect the possible defects of Sufi *ma'rifa*.

This esoteric knowledge could be fallible, as al-Ghazālī recognized, especially when it was raised to the status of an invariant source of unimpeachably veridical and certain knowledge about the phenomenal universe. Not only was this knowledge potentially defeasible, since it could be produced by error, self-delusion, madness, or divine deception, for example, but it was not given to all. By contrast, in the arena of everyday human existence, rational knowledge is open, accessible to all, and once its claims are verified, valuable. It is worthy of the name "knowledge" because it tells human beings truths about the material world and its constituents, as well as about the world of conceptual abstraction. This information is ordinarily reliable and predictably certain because it is probable to a degree that surpasses the boundaries of natural human concern. No item of rational knowledge, even a "first truth of reason," is ever absolutely invulnerable to error, however, because of time or the possible occurrence of "other world" scenarios. Verified rational knowledge-claims nonetheless do yield knowledge that is "certain," since such knowledge is probable to a degree that exceeds natural concern and need.

As al-Ghazālī would discover at the onset of his second epistemological crisis that concerned salvific knowledge and his individual eternal destiny (commenced Rajab 488/July 1095), the only purpose that human knowledge does not serve is the soul's search for spiritual wisdom. In this arena, rational verities do not suffice for saving knowledge. When describing the emotionally charged circumstances which culminated in his first retreat from public and familial obligations, al-Ghazālī later recalled that he had spent his time "dealing with sciences that were unimportant and that contributed nothing to [his journey] on the road to the Hereafter (*fa idhan anā fihā muqbil ʿalā ʿulūm ghayr muhimma wa lā nāfiʿa fī ṭarīqat al-ākhirā*)."<sup>34</sup> Prior to his initial retirement and sincere resolution to lead the contemplative life of the Sufi adepts at the end of Dhū'l ḥijja 488/December 1095 at the earliest, al-Ghazālī then had not understood—in the most personal and intimate sense of comprehending something as true—one elemental verity. He had not yet grasped that on the *sālik's* route, rational knowledge encumbered the free flight of the soul toward its eternal abode.

One source of al-Ghazālī's confusion about these two different kinds of knowledge, the theological knowledge that religious revelation disclosed and rational knowledge, was rooted in the seeming impossibility of externally assessing *maʿrifa* because it was unique to the one who received it. His epistemological teaching, by contrast, emphasized the common possession by all of the primary rational principles. They comprised a part of God's endowment to all human beings, and assuming a person's sanity, were the same for all. In the context of the passage excerpted above<sup>35</sup> [sections I and II first part], al-Ghazālī meant clearly that, as a result of the Sufis' construction of the paradigm of esoteric knowledge as that which is disclosed in a brilliant flash of intuition, the first principles of reason were useless as tools to evaluate the verity of the content of mystic *maʿrifa*.

There was also a second aspect to al-Ghazālī's "baffling sickness." This problem concerned the inability of the first principles of the intellect to guarantee that new items of information, which the discursive

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<sup>34</sup> *Faḍāʾih*, *Fayṣal*, and *Qisṭās* were all written to combat the sophistic attacks on knowledge made by the Bāṭiniyya or the Ismāʿīliyya. Protection of the Muslim community demanded this work. Al-Ghazālī's second crisis is a wholly spiritual one that turned on his fear that he would not be granted eternal salvation; cf. *Munqidh*, 36-37. *Munqidh*, 36, lines 12-13. The second crisis began in Rajab 488/July-August 1095. 489 A.H. opened on 31 December 1095 and closed on 18 December 1096.

<sup>35</sup> See text quoted above.

operations of the intellect produced from the axiomata of reason, were as certain, true, and trustworthy as the “firsts” themselves. In this time period before the end of 488/1095, therefore, al-Ghazālī doubted both the foundations of ecstatic knowledge—since it could be the product of delusion, but was not provable as such—as well as the products of the discursive functioning of the intellect.

Al-Ghazālī here teetered on the borders of disequilibrium. He appeared to have forgotten the earlier counsel of his first spiritual advisor al-Nassāj who had urged him to understand that heart and reason were not destructively opposed; rather *al-qalb* and *al-ʿaql* functioned harmoniously in the balanced individual. Al-Ghazālī’s illness could not have been cured by a rational proof because in the larger personal sense what he doubted was his intellectual ability as well as his spiritual capacity to access the province of mystic knowledge. If we assume that al-Ghazālī’s epistemic crisis persisted into the early period of his discipleship with al-Fārmadhī, that is, into 471-472/1078-1080, then this conclusion about the overall nature of his crisis becomes even clearer.

Al-Ghazālī’s first biographer was al-Fārisī (d. 529/1134-1135), who had known him personally, so his report on this question is illuminating. Al-Fārisī remembered that as a young novice in Nisabur, although he assiduously practiced *dhikr* and persistently performed all else that his Shaykh, al-Fārmadhī, required him to do, al-Ghazālī went unrewarded, since he did not attain that which he sought. He sought *maʿrifā*, a type of knowledge reserved for the experienced adept, if he were to be so favored by God. Still very much spiritually immature at this juncture in his life, al-Ghazālī had not yet learned that in his relationship to his earthly preceptor as well as to God, the seeker had to be as “a dead body in the hands of its washer.” Al-Ghazālī still struggled to question: to ask ‘how,’ ‘why,’ ‘why not’?<sup>36</sup>

#### V. *Divine Light (nūr) as God’s Guidance (hidāyat Allāh)*

What was the “light” that God cast into al-Ghazālī’s breast or heart? It was most likely not the light of intuitive revelation that disclosed eso-

<sup>36</sup> *Sīrat*, 44, lines 20-21, 45, lines 1-3; *Ṭabaqāt* 4:109. Al-Ghazālī did not attain the stage wherein the favored individual received inspired knowledge (*maʿrifā*) from God. See *Ihyāʾ* 3:2, 65, lines 20-29 where al-Ghazālī enumerated several of the ways in which the *murīd* must submit himself completely to his spiritual guide. (See also 4:5, 238 and 4:7, 321.) Apparently, hasty pursuit of his goal had left this young man, all of whose bad character traits had yet to be eradicated through practice of the Way, poised on the precipice of his first epistemological crisis.

teric mystical knowledge. If al-Ghazālī had experienced *kashf* or “unveiling” of the truth of the Divine at this point in time, then surely this direct, clear, immediate vision of the Truth would have made his continued “search for truth”<sup>37</sup> unnecessary and inexplicable. Moreover, it would have emptied his later (no earlier than Dhū'l-ḥijja 488/December 1095) sincere, mature resolve to live the mystic life of any significant religious content and meaning. The light in question [sect. III] seemed more to have been the beneficent guidance of God that comforted and assured him of the necessary compatibility of heart and reason. God's guidance allowed him to understand the essential harmony of the relationship between firm recall of God and sound intellect in the ordinary lives of people.

Muslims ask God at the beginning of each cycle (*rak'a*) of the daily prayer to “guide us to the straight path.” In one aspect of this appeal to divine assistance, the supplicant calls upon God to help him to find the proper balance in all facets of the human character. The cultivation of praiseworthy attributes leads to temporal fulfillment as well as to the possible attainment of eternal salvation. In order to discriminate between those acts the traits of which are blameworthy and those whose qualifications are commendable, man must acquire knowledge from its two divinely provided sources: revelation and reason. These work together for the purpose of guiding the character development of the human being so that he may achieve happiness. In fact, the rational sciences must complement the revelational, since neither alone is sufficient to help man achieve eternal felicity.

Good conduct or virtuous behavior demands that a person know and either practice that which is good or avoid that which is evil; as a result, decision-making in regard to conduct requires both kinds of knowledge, rational and religious. Al-Ghazālī stated this view emphatically in the *Ihyā'*: “the one who calls for pure uncritical acceptance (*maḥḍ al-taqlīd*) in complete isolation from reason is ignorant; just as the one who is satisfied with nothing but reason (*bi-mujarrad al-aql*), independent of the lights of the Qur'ān and the Sunna, is deceived (*maghrūr*). . . . He who becomes satisfied with the rational sciences (*bi'l-ʿulūm al-aqlīya*) is harmed by them as the sick person is [harmed] by food.” He further maintained

<sup>37</sup> *Munqidh*, 15, lines 8-16: “I said to myself: the truth cannot lie outside these four classes. . . . I now hastened to follow out these ways and to investigate what these groups had achieved, beginning with the science of *kalām* (*ʿilm al-kalām*) and then taking up the way of philosophy (*bi-tarīq al-falsafa*), the authoritative teaching of the Bāṭinīya (*bi-taʿlīm al-bāṭinīya*), and the way of the Sufis (*bi-tarīq al-ṣūfiya*).” *Mishkāt*, 82, line 2: “for the term ‘light’ expresses right guidance alone” (*fa-inna al-nūr yarādu li'l-hidāyat*).

that “the imagination of the one who supposes that the rational sciences are contrary to the revelational sciences (*li’l-‘ulūm al-shar‘īya*), and [imagines] that their reconciliation is impossible (*ghayr mumkin*), is an imagination which proceeds from blindness in the eye of the intellect (*huwa ṣān ṣādir ‘an ‘aman fī ‘ayn al-baṣīra*).”

Al-Ghazālī emphasized the importance of the role that trained reason played in helping man to choose among actions in terms of their relation to his ultimate goal. As a consequence, he explained that: “in the great majority of cases, reason, operating in accord with the rules put forth in the *Miṣyār al-‘ilm*, is able to strip away the deceptive outer covering from the truth (*‘an al-ḥaqq*), and to recommend that which conforms better in its future consequences [in view of the ultimate aim] even if, at present, it [the worthy action] calls for [greater] effort and difficulty.” Ethical assessment of human actions by reference to future consequences, then, is one of the specific functions that reason performs.<sup>38</sup>

Rational knowledge and the spring from which it flows, the intellect, are noble in nature; thus “whenever God mentions light and darkness He means thereby knowledge and ignorance respectively, as is evident in His words, ‘and He will bring them out of the darkness to the light.’”<sup>39</sup> The intellect, according to al-Ghazālī, is “the means of happiness in this world and the next” because its development permits man to see that the “really useful knowledge is that which makes [him] grow in the fear (*khawf*) of God, in awareness of [his] own faults, and in knowledge of the service of [his] Lord; . . . it opens [his] eyes to the defects in [his] conduct so that he may guard against them; . . .”<sup>40</sup> Al-Ghazālī maintained that “the nobility of the human being is due to rational knowledge (*wa sharaf al-‘abd bi-sabab al-‘ilm*) on account of the fact that it is one of God’s attributes.” Moreover, “the most noble of the objects of knowledge (*ma‘lūmāt*) is God Most Exalted. In the same way, the knowledge (*ma‘rifa*) of God is the highest knowledge (*afḍāl al-ma‘ārif*).” As a consequence, then, the knowledge of all other things is noble only because it (*li-annahā*) is a knowledge of God’s actions, or a knowledge of the way which brings [the person] near to the knowledge of God, or of the command that facilitates the attainment of the knowledge of God and nearness to Him.”<sup>41</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Qur’ān 1:6; *Ihyā’* 3:1, 15, lines 10-15, 17-18; *Miṣyār*, 64, lines 5-9; *Ihyā’* 4:3, 139, lines 24-27.

<sup>39</sup> *Ihyā’* 1:1, 73, lines 9-10; lines 12-13; Qur’ān 2:258-59; *Miṣyār*, 66, lines 1-3 repeats the Qur’ānic verse.

<sup>40</sup> *Miṣyār*, 84, lines 5-9.

<sup>41</sup> *Maqṣad*, 93, lines 10-15; see *Miṣyār*, 138, line 16, 139, line 1: “rational cognitions

Accordingly, "every person is rightly guided in the measure that he is directed [in his behavior] by right reason," and it is clear then that guidance has a single source, God, but two elements: reason, or intellect (*ʿaql*), and revelation, in whichever form it occurs. Oriented toward a practical understanding of their cooperation in directing the human being, al-Ghazālī explained that while "reason guides [the human being] by true proofs (*wa ʿl-ʿaql yurshudu bi-ḥujāj ḥaqīqīya*) . . . the immediate perception of this truth [comes] only through [the] divine light (*idrāk hā-dhihi al-ḥaqīqat lā yakūnu illā bi-nūr ilāhī* . . .)." In the instance where "reason inclines toward something that is disagreeable in the present but beneficial in the future, and passion inclines toward the opposite thing, pleasing in the present but unfortunate in the future, if these two inclinations, struggling and contending with one another for control, ask for the faculty which directs and thinks, [then] the light of God Most High hastens to the aid of reason, (*sāruʿa nūr allāhi taʿalā ilā nusrat al-ʿaql*)."<sup>42</sup>

Al-Ghazālī taught that these two elements are designed to work harmoniously in the human creature, since revelation informs man of what God prescribes and prohibits while reason permits man to perceive His commandments and thereby, to understand the right relationships that obtain in the development of virtue. Virtue, for al-Ghazālī, was a good habit that is influenced by both reason and revelation.<sup>43</sup> When combined, these sources then offer perfect guidance to human beings so that they can achieve the ultimate human happiness, which is salvation. Reason on its own, nevertheless, has an additional function to fulfill. Reason is the faculty that enables man to differentiate among those who claim to possess knowledge by subjecting their "truth" to scrutiny.

The light of God's guidance illumined al-Ghazālī's heart so that he once again could see that the intellect had an important role to play

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(*al-ʿulūm al-ʿaqlīya*) are perceived by the intellect which is the most noble of all the faculties." See also in *Mizān*, 142, lines 9-10: "Know that the nobility of the intellect comes from the fact that it is the seat where knowledge (*ʿilm*) and wisdom (*ḥikma*) are found and from the fact that it is their instrument"; and 59, line 13: "Certainly, the intellect is the most noble faculty of all."

<sup>42</sup> *Mizān*, 65, lines 4, 7-13.

<sup>43</sup> *Mizān*, 115, lines 11-12; *Mizān*, 68, lines 13-16, 69, lines 1-4. Reason and revelation make guidance available to all human beings either directly or indirectly. *Mizān*, 86, lines 1-2: "praiseworthy (virtuous) character is that which reconciles itself with the criterion of reason and the revealed religious Law (*miʿyār al-ʿaql waʿl-sharʿ*); *Mizān*, 146, lines 9-10: "the religious sciences are inconceivable without the rational sciences. The rational sciences play the role of remedies with relationship to health, the religious sciences representing nutritious substances"; *Mizān*, 204, lines 9-11: "all actions which emanate from free will (*jamʿ aḥʿāl al-ikhtiyārīya*) must be weighed by the balance-scale of the Sharʿ and narrowly tied to the stipulations of this Law either in that which touches on action and reaction or in that which touches on adherence and interdiction."



in the development of the truly virtuous, pious Muslim who, through reason, first comes to understand by means of observation and mundane experience, *lā bi-taqlīd*, the “signs” of God within the human domain. The first principles of reason in al-Ghazālī’s teaching therefore were true and certain; moreover, they were “present in the human mind and to hand,” ready for use.<sup>44</sup> Once al-Ghazālī regained his equilibrium with respect to the status and value of reason in its encounter with *maʿrifa*, he was able to judge, as he would do explicitly later in his life, that in the instances in which God truly disclosed His Self to His saints, the knowledge perceived through *kashf* belonged to an entirely different order and was of an ineffably different kind from the knowledge which the senses and reason provided. These were the media which, on the one hand, comprised the sources of knowledge that were available to all. On the other hand, as a knowledge-source *kashf* was limited to the few here in this world.

When received, *kashf* could illuminate the secret hidden realities of earthly things, but this was not the purpose for which God unveiled some of His Truth for His saints to see in an immediate apprehension of the Real. Rather, God showed some of His Self to the seeker for religion’s sake, for the purpose of removing from the mundane sphere, and thus magnifying, the saving knowledge of spiritual wisdom. Divine unveiling provided disclosure that was intended to aid the adept in moving nearer this highest sort of knowledge. Immediately perceived knowledge of the Divine was God’s freely given gift of Himself to His saints.

Reserved for the few, *kashf* was not the source of certain and true knowledge in the ordinary circumstances of the human case. Divinely implanted in man, the intellect comprised part of the human being’s inborn nature (*fiṭra*). According to al-Ghazālī, the word *ʿaql* was an homonymous term that is used to designate four separate things, some of which explained the powers of reason and others of which specified the content of reason. In the *Kitāb al-ʿilm* of the *Ihyāʾ*, al-Ghazālī explored this quadripartite understanding of the term *al-ʿaql*. First, as an instinct (*gharīza*) or a quality (*ṣifa*), *ʿaql* distinguished the human being and prepared the person to understand and to grasp the speculative sciences (*al-ʿulūm al-naẓariyya*), as well as to master the abstract sciences (*al-ʿulūm al-fikrīya*). Similarly for al-Ḥārith ibn Asad al-Muḥāsibī, reason operated “as though it were a light (*nūr*) cast into the heart preparing it thereby to grasp things and understand them.” Second, *ʿaql* referred to the basic

<sup>44</sup> *Munqidh*, 14, line 11; *Mīzān*, 145.

content of the intellect, since "it includes the self-evident, necessary first principles of reason. It is the power in the understanding to discern, for example, that two are greater than one and that one individual cannot be in two distinct places at the same time." Concurring, al-Ghazālī remarked moreover that "this definition of 'aql as axiomatic knowledge is right, as it stands, because this knowledge is existent, even in the infant"; and "the application of the word 'aql to it [this knowledge] is clear. . . . What is wrong is to hold that only this kind of knowledge exists [and is encompassed by 'aql]." <sup>45</sup> Third, 'aql applied to "that knowledge which is acquired through experience, in the course of events." Empirical knowledge (*al-ʿulūm al-tajārib*) is acquired (*bi-l-iktisāb*); thus, it does not form a constitutive element of man's nature (*ṭabʿ*). It is not innate (*maṭbūʿ*) to man as are knowledge of the first principles and speculative knowledge. <sup>46</sup> Fourth, 'aql referred to the development of the instinct or power of reason to the extent that a human being knows his ultimate aim in performing or refraining from specific actions. In this sense, "reason" designates the faculty by or through which a man is able to conquer various human appetites in view of his final goal. <sup>47</sup> While human beings do differ in their rational capacities, save in the domain of the necessary first principles of reason, al-Ghazālī taught that every human being is born with an inherent knowledge of reality—*inherent*, since the human being is readily disposed to perceive reality. <sup>48</sup>

God's beneficent guidance projected the "light" of the intellect into his heart and thereby, "restored his soul to health and an even balance." As a result, al-Ghazālī now was ready to continue his study of the diverse Islamic sciences and to begin his inquiries into Greek philosophy (*falsafa*), the authoritative instruction (*taʿlīm*) of the Bāṭiniya, and the writings of the theorists of Sufism. <sup>49</sup> Perhaps more importantly, he was now prepared to discover for himself how and in what ways Sufi mystical knowledge could and should relate to rational knowledge. At this juncture, I can return to answer the questions which were laid out as central to analyzing al-Ghazālī's initial crisis of skeptical confusion.

<sup>45</sup> Hārith (b. 781-d. 857 A.D.) was a mystic whose writings, especially the *Riʾāya* and the *Nasāʾih*, heavily influenced al-Ghazālī's understanding of Sufism. *Ihyāʾ*, 1:1, 75, lines 14-18; *Ihyāʾ*, 1:1, 76, lines 1-5; *Mizān*, 28, lines 14-16.

<sup>46</sup> *Ihyāʾ* 1:1, 76, lines 5, 10-12.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.* lines 7-10.

<sup>48</sup> *Ihyāʾ* 1:1, 77, lines 6-7; *Ibid.*, lines 26-29.

<sup>49</sup> *Munqidh*, 13, lines 23-24, 14, lines 1-2; *Munqidh*, 13, lines 22-23; *Munqidh*, 15, lines 8-16.

Al-Ghazālī's doctrine confirmed that the self-evident axiomatic "givens" of the intellect were innate to human beings; thus, by definition, sound reason provided true, necessary, and certain knowledge. As a human faculty, the intellect itself prepared the person to grasp items of abstract, speculative knowledge. This inherent disposition of reason, however, required training, so that the products of the intellect in its discursive operations could be corroborated as certain, veridical, and trustworthy. The discipline of logic provided the requisite instruction to guide the healthy intellect in this function. Writing in the *Fayṣal*, al-Ghazālī observed that what reasoners disagreed about most often "really comes down to the apodeictic proofs (*ilā barāhīn*)."<sup>50</sup> He thus urged that "there be among them an agreed upon rule for apodeictic proof that all of them acknowledge. For if they do not agree about the balance-scale, they cannot do away with differences over the weighing."

Five assessment criteria [*mawāzīn*/“balance-scales”] are given and “they are those about which disagreement is absolutely inconceivable once they have been understood. Moreover, every one who understands them acknowledges that they are the channels of sure and certain knowledge in a decisive manner.”<sup>50</sup> Al-Ghazālī staunchly supported the study and use of logical methods in order to develop, structure, and evaluate sound arguments. Not only did he challenge the men of *kalām*'s claim that logic (*al-mantiq*) was an area of study forbidden by Islam, but he composed several volumes for the explicit purpose of making the tools of *al-mantiq* easily accessible to members of the ‘*ulamā*’ class.<sup>51</sup> Al-Ghazālī

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<sup>50</sup> *Munqidh*, 22, lines 10-12; See *Qistās*, 82, lines 8-10 where al-Ghazālī emphasizes that logic is the measurement standard (*mīzān*) against which all types of knowledge in terms of either their truth or their falsity are to be evaluated. Every branch of knowledge that is not based on authority must be assessed by sound logical procedures. *Faḍā’ih*, 143, lines 1-7: “for cognitions are divided into the rational (*‘aqliya*) and the traditional (*sam‘iya*). And the rational are divided into the decisive (*qaṭ‘iya*) and the conjectural (or probable/*ẓanniya*); each [has] its own way and [methods of] proof which can be learned from anyone who is able to teach it . . . and thus, there is no *taqlīd* involved in it” (lines 3-5). Cf. *Tahāfut*, Preface iv, pars. 22-25, 15-17; *Fayṣal*, 187, lines 7-8; *Fayṣal*, 188, lines 12-17.

<sup>51</sup> See *Munqidh*, 31, lines 1-6; 33, lines 22-24 where he stresses the “neutrality” of correctly structured and applied logical procedures in the process of evaluating the truth or falsity of belief-claims. See *Tahāfut*, 15, par. 22, 20, par. 27 for example where the claim that “there is nothing in logic that is contrary to religion” is made several times. At least five other of his surviving texts are devoted to explaining *al-mantiq* (Aristotelian logic) to the *mutakallimīn*, namely *Maqāsid*, *Mīyār*, *Mihakk*, *Faḍā’ih*, and *Qistās*. In fact, in the *Qistās* as well as in the earlier *Maqāsid*, al-Ghazālī used analogies taken from the Qur’ān to make his appeal to use the new logical forms and proof procedures more palatable to the intransigent among the *mutakallimīn*. The *Qistās*, too, “nativizes” the language of the newer syllogistic logic.

argued that the proper application of the correct reasoning procedure to the correct subject matter provided one route through which individuals were able to extinguish conflict about some matter of fact.

In Ghazālīan theory, sense-derived information rose to the standard of "knowledge" when it was verified in the correct ways through observation and experiment and, where required, combined with the appropriate theoretical and axiomatic knowledge. All of the criteria that al-Ghazālī initially demanded of certain and true knowledge therefore could be satisfied by the sound employ of the educated intellect in one or more of its diverse aspects. When properly obtained and adequately tested, speculative as well as empirical rational cognitions in addition to the knowledge-claims based upon them, therefore, were not ordinarily dubitable. Furthermore, on account of the fact that God gave to man the faculty of reason as a part of his native, inborn equipment, the certainty of the first truths of the intellect never comprised an object of true doubt for al-Ghazālī. Instead, he used skepticism about the operations and objects of the senses and reason to remind people that categorical, absolute certainty concerns the things of God alone and is a free gift from Him to human creatures. Transcendentally veridical, immediate, and direct knowledge of the Divine is given only through revelation and for spiritual purposes exclusively.

As a special way of knowing, the *ma'rifa* of the mystic thus existed outside of the sphere of normal human knowledge. Within the domain of ordinary human existence however—except in cases where the "knower" is mad or in a drunken stupor—al-Ghazālī maintained that sound human belief in the first intellectual principles constituted veridical, certain belief. A person did not acquire certain knowledge of the fundamental rational truths through divine revelation. Knowledge of them, according to his doctrine, was implanted in the human being's God-given intelligence (*'aql*). Al-Ghazālī wrote that "first principles are not sought, since they are present and to hand."<sup>52</sup>

The soundly tutored intellect then is the balance-scale that al-Ghazālī upheld as the assessor of certain and true rational knowledge in the arena of everyday human existence. The healthy, trained intellect is the source of innate, axiomatic knowledge. This faculty also develops the mechanisms that aid it in the processing and verification of sense-derived information. For al-Ghazālī, consequently, the certitude of the *awwalīyāt* neither was produced by divine revelation nor resulted from ongoing

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<sup>52</sup> *Munqidh*, 14, line 11.

divine illumination. Man's certainty of them, nevertheless, did rest upon God, for it was He who had created indubitable knowledge of the self-evident necessary truths by implanting their source—the intellect—within every human creature as a part of its nature as human.

In the circumstances of al-Ghazālī's personal case, God's light had not illumined the truth and certainty of what was knowable as such through reason; rather, divine enlightenment had given him the confidence and mental well-being to believe that his reason was sound. *Kashf* or immediate divine disclosure did not show the primary intellectual concepts to be true and reliable; instead, their veracity and dependability constituted part of the inborn, natural equipment of the human being. It was divine guidance (*hidāyat Allāh*) and not direct divine intuitive disclosure (*kashf*) which allowed al-Ghazālī to trust his intellect's capacity to deliver true judgements.

Al-Ghazālī's confirmation of man's inherent ability to reach true judgements did not mean that he believed that all sense- or reason-based knowledge-claims were authentic. On the contrary, he worked to define the methods and ways by or through which human beings are able to distinguish instances of true knowledge from "empty imaginings." Al-Ghazālī's doctrine emphasized the important role that the soundly trained intellect played in the work of discerning authentic knowledge from spurious opinion.<sup>53</sup> In his teaching, the well-tutored intellect enables the human being to perceive the true from the false in the domain of human factual knowledge. Axiomatic knowledge is true as well. In the usual circumstances and conditions under which a human being endeavors to obtain knowledge of matters of fact, *ma'rifa* does not operate, since it delivers knowledge of a special kind, an "intuitive perception of things divine," by way of an utterly different form, that is, "unveiling," for a special spiritual purpose, namely, to aid the seeker in his quest for God and for salvation.

## VI. Conclusion

On the one hand, al-Ghazālī was impressed by the stark contrast between the sources of *ma'rifa* and *ʿilm*; but on the other, this did not push him to reject rational knowledge in favor of the clear, direct, and immediate vision of the truth that *ma'rifa* unveiled. Al-Ghazālī was disinclined to deny the worth of reason in the discovery and clarification of mun-

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<sup>53</sup> See above, 39-41 and 59-60.

dane knowledge. His reluctance was based on his unwillingness to accept the Sufi undercutting of reason and exaltation of *ma'rifa* as the epistemological exemplar. As a believing Muslim nonetheless, the special intuitive insight of the mystic held a particular appeal for him because it purported to provide singularly secure, immediately direct, and absolutely indubitable knowledge about God.

The issue of balancing the claims of immediacy and clarity as evidentiary hallmarks of knowledge with the externally verifiable foundational criteria of knowledge posed a significant problem for al-Ghazālī, one which he solved ultimately by bringing advanced religious enlightenment into a relationship with rational knowledge. Although al-Ghazālī recognized that mundane knowledge never could attain the clarity and evident-ness to the knower that inspired, immediately and directly "unveiled" knowledge achieved, he, nevertheless, wanted to discover how others could know as well as how the mystic himself could know that he was not the subject of delusion. Al-Ghazālī searched to identify the ways in which *ma'rifa* could be delimited and the seeker of mystical experience restrained in his pursuit of advanced religious enlightenment. Although al-Ghazālī accepted the theoretical possibility of direct religious enlightenment, his supposition of its occurrence did not necessarily falsify the truths of reason. Instead, the possible existence of *ma'rifa* gave content to al-Ghazālī's hypothesis that there could be a vantage point from which those intellectual verities would be as faulty as sense-data judgements had been, when they were evaluated by the *hākim al-'aql* or "reason-judge."

Does this especial penetrating intuitive insight, *ma'rifa*, descend without warning, without preparation of (or by) the recipient, and at random, in such a way that man possesses neither the faculty nor the facility to assess whether he is "awake" or is dreaming, whether he is sane or is mad, and whether he sees a cat in reality or knows in truth that ten are more than three? In each case, al-Ghazālī answered "no."

Al-Ghazālī abandoned his search for an apodictic foundation for knowledge in the domain of the physical senses, because he recognized that categorical certainty and absolute invulnerability to error were neither attainable about matters of fact nor even necessary for the production of effective, usable knowledge about the material realm. In the sphere of intellectual first principles, however, and by contrast, the foundationalist agenda was much more difficult to forswear. It was harder to abandon there because in the arena of the primary conceptual verities, the invariance of the truths of reason mattered. Although al-Ghazālī

hypothesized that “unveiled” inspired knowledge in relation to the axiomata of reason could provide the standpoint from which those primary analytic propositions could be proven false, *maʿrifa* in his view remained a problematic sort of knowledge. *Maʿrifa*’s qualifying claim to exemplify preeminently certain knowledge in this world—not in the next—faltered in his eyes because the only evidence for the unassailable veracity and certainty of *maʿrifa*’s content was provided by the one who experienced its receipt, and he might be mad! Al-Ghazālī apparently refused to yield the search for epistemic criteria that were knowable by all to the ultimately subjectivist rationale of the Cartesian *cogito*. Rather, he upheld reason and made of the knowledge-acquisition effort a practical concern and an enterprise that a man could reasonably expect to undertake successfully. As the final end product of his initial crisis of knowledge, al-Ghazālī learned that each source of knowledge—*ʿaql* and *maʿrifa*—operated in a different epistemic order as well as for a different epistemological purpose.